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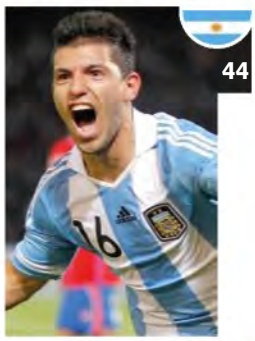

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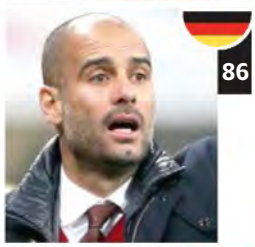

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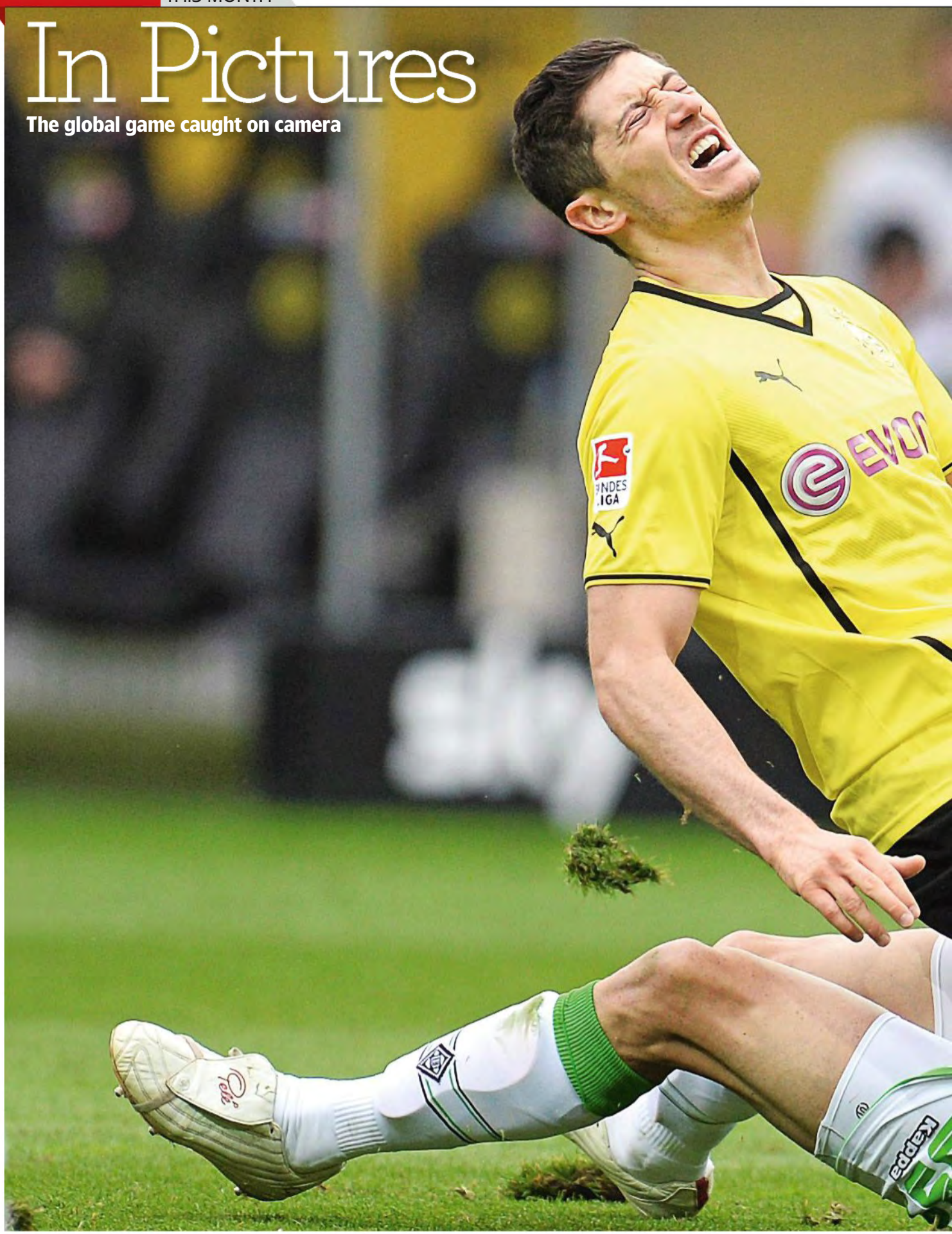

GERMANY...Borussia Dortmund striker Robert Lewandowski (left) collides with Borussia Monchengladbach defender Martin Stranzl

QATAR...Mohammad Nosrati of Tractor Sazi and Sebastian Soria of Lekhwiya get to grips during their AFC Champions League match in Doha

RUSSIA...CSKA Moscow fans light flares during their league game at home to Zenit

PORTUGAL...a face-painted Benfica fan at the Estadio da Luz

BELGIUM...Lokeren coach Peter Maes is carried aloft by his players after they won the Belgian Cup Final against Zulte Waregem

FRANCE...Marseille's Andre Ayew (right) heads clear under pressure from Nice's Romain Genevois

ENGLAND...Arsenal's Bacary Sagna (in red) challenges Tottenham Hotspur's Danny Rose in the north-London derby at White Hart Lane

PICTURES OF THE MONTH QR CODE

To see more of the best photos from the month, scan the QR code using any free QR reader that can be downloaded to your smartphone. You can also see the images by logging on to bit.ly/1jP276l.qrcode

FROM THE EDITOR

Bayern Munich and Barcelona are often held up as model clubs – successful on the pitch, well-run off it – for the rest of football to follow.

Yet the recent downfall of respective club presidents Uli Hoeness and Sandro Rosell suggests that all is not black and white when it comes to fan-owned clubs.

Barcelona moved quickly to be rid of Rosell in the aftermath of the Neymar transfer scandal, yet they face a turbulent few months as they fight a FIFA transfer ban.

> The downfall of Hoeness and Rosell suggests that all is not black and white when it comes to fan-owned clubs

Whether Bayern can stay unaffected by the demise of Hoeness remains to be seen. They are currently breaking all sorts of playing records, and by the time we next report on the climax of the European season, they may have achieved even greater success.

Our next issue will not cover the run-in to the European league campaigns. Instead, it will be our World Cup special, following the tried and trusted format of a team-by-team guide to all 32 finalists at Brazil 2014. We're already excited about its arrival – and it will be available on the iPad (right) and in other digital formats.

Gavin Hamilton, Editor

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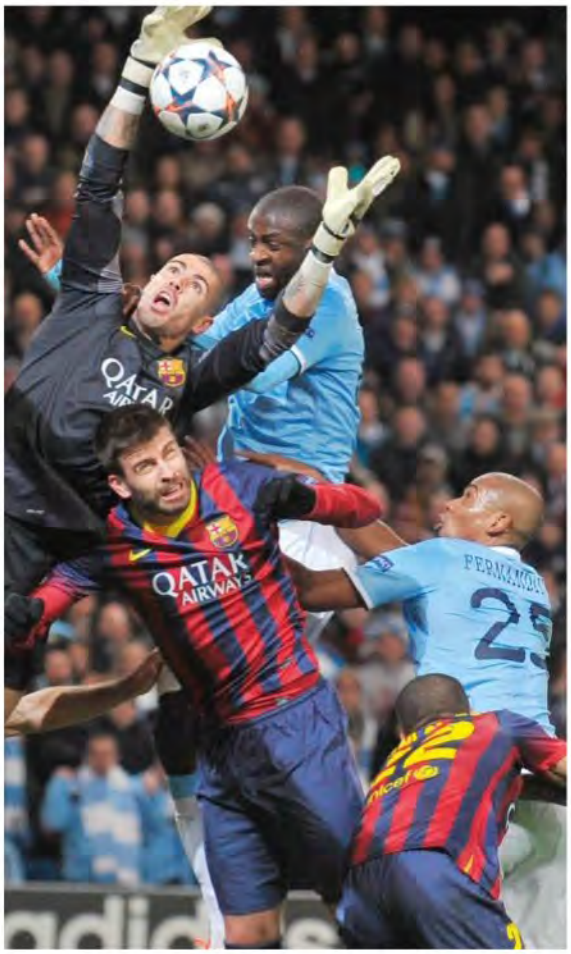


Under pressure...a transfer ban would affect Barcelona's rebuilding plans

Barcelona plan appeal against transfer ban

Barcelona say they will appeal against the 14-month transfer ban imposed on them by FIFA for breaching the international regulations on the transfer of players aged under 18.

The reigning Spanish champions were sanctioned by FIFA's disciplinary committee for breaking the rules in the case of 10 under-18 players and they were punished with a transfer embargo for two transfer windows and a fine of 450,000 Swiss francs (£305,000).

"The club will lodge an appeal to FIFA and where necessary will submit the appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS)," read a statement from Barcelona.

The transfer ban has placed several summer moves in jeopardy, including the transfer of Croatian teenager Alen Halilovic from Dinamo Zagreb and the search for a replacement for goalkeeper Victor Valdes.

Valdes is out of contract in the summer and Barcelona had planned a move for Borussia Monchengladbach's Marc-Andre Ter Stegen.

"I'm a machine"

Wolfsburg's Switzerland international full-back Ricardo Rodriguez reveals his secret for not missing a single second of Bundesliga action this season

SWITZERLAND

FIFA plot to stop Garcia as allegations against Warner mount

A plot to remove FIFA ethics investigator Michael Garcia from his post was stopped in March, following behind-the-scenes manoeuvres at the ExCo meeting in Zurich.

American lawyer Garcia has been investigating allegations of corruption in the bidding process into the 2018 and 2022 World Cups – and his determination to the cause appears to have disturbed some within FIFA.

"There was a bit of informal chat about the possibility that some people wanted to see Garcia removed from the inquiry and that it might be raised at the ExCo meeting but it wasn't," said FIFA vice-president Jim Boyce, who suggested that he would have resigned had the move to remove Garcia been successful.

News of the Garcia plot followed a report by *The Daily Telegraph* that suggested a cash deal between disgraced ex-vice presidents Jack Warner and Mohamed Bin Hammam.

The *Telegraph* claimed to have uncovered "documents [which] appear to show" that Warner and his family were paid almost $2million "by a Qatari firm controlled" by Bin Hammam.

One invoice "for work carried out between 2005 and 2010" was issued within weeks of the votes by the executive committee on December 1, 2010, which awarded the 2018 finals to Russia and 2022 to the Gulf state.

The Qataris, who threw enormous promotional resources at the bid, have always denied any wrongdoing. So have Warner and Bin Hammam.

Garcia is expected to continue his investigation into these allegations, along with reports from Australia from a whistle-blower who claimed a cheque for $462,200 from the Australian 2022 bid was deposited into an account controlled by Warner.

Carrying on...a plot to remove Garcia has been stopped

SWITZERLAND

Confusion over UEFA plan for Nations League

Competitive...Italy and Spain would be in the top flight

Plans by European governing body UEFA to launch a new competition, the Nations League, to replace international friendlies was greeted with a mix of surprise and confusion.

Wolfgang Niersbach, chairman of the national teams competition committee, welcomed the Nations League launch after its approval by UEFA Congress in Astana, Kazakhstan, saying: "We accept and respect that all UEFA member associations have agreed to create a new competition. This is a big step for national teams in Europe and we hope that fans will support the new format."

But back home in Germany, Niersbach sounded much less buoyant, being quoted as saying: "It was a long process and I do not deny that the DFB and also I personally have openly expressed concerns."

German league president

Mixed messages...Niersbach

Reinhard Rauball went further, saying: "We were very surprised that this topic came up in Astana without formal notice on the advance agenda and that such a far-reaching decision was made. There should be no instant changes to the current balanced arrangement of club and national team competitions."

Borussia Dortmund coach Jurgen Klopp complained that "neither players nor coaches were asked for their opinions".

The Nations League will kick off in 2018 with promotion and relegation. Teams will be in divisions according to the coefficients and will compete to reach a higher group, qualify for Euro play-offs, or to become Nations League champions.

In a further complication ahead of Euro 2020, each group will be subdivided into four pools of three or four teams. Play-offs will follow the "regular" league programme with four Euro slots up for grabs even for a nation from the bottom sector of the European game.

Qualifying for the European Championship remains largely the same although this will now begin in the March following the preliminaries for a main tournament rather than in the subsequent September.

Keir Radnedge

WORLD CUP 2014

Tim VICKERY

THE VIEW FROM BRAZIL

Traditionally Brazilians get right behind the national side but things could be very different this summer

"I see the enthusiasm outside Brazil," said Ronaldo at the end of March in his capacity as a member of the World Cup Local Organising Committee. "I'm very happy when I see that same enthusiasm here as well."

The very statement hints that the commodity might be in short supply; that the apparent dream relationship between the World Cup and the Brazilian people is on the rocks and in need of marriage guidance.

That would also be the conclusion drawn from a song released by respected Rio musician Edu Krieger, which has become an internet success. In *Desculpe Neymar* (sorry Neymar), Krieger expresses that on this occasion he will not be cheering on Brazil's poster boy and his team-mates. "We can't be real champions," he sings, "spending more than 10 billion...we have beautiful and monumental stadiums while schools and hospitals are on the verge of collapse."

Accompanied just by his guitar, the song is rooted in sorrow rather than anger. "I've always been a fan of the national team," he explained in an interview, "but I don't feel comfortable supporting the side this time.

"I think the way we've organised the World Cup could not have been worse, especially bearing in mind what was promised and what has in fact been done. This song is a lament that I don't feel the enthusiasm I'd like to have in relation to the event."

Football frenzy

Every four years Brazil builds itself up to a frenzy during the World Cup. People get together to decorate their neighbourhood with bunting and paintings, streets compete to be considered the most striking. Millions who normally have little interest in football become obsessed with the performance of the national team.

It is like a jubilee, but with an important difference: rather than commemorating an aristocratic royal family, they are celebrating themselves. This is the moment when, traditionally, their country appears in front of the entire world for positive reasons: as winners, often in enviable style. And those responsible – the players – could easily be the boy next door, the poor kid who started out with nothing more than a dream. The World Cup, then, is a hugely important time for Brazilian society.

This year, though, the feeling might be different. Hosting the event would seem to be resulting in the opposite effect of previous World Cups. Now Brazil is appearing in the spotlight for negative reasons, with its internal problems humiliatingly held up for global comment and assessment.

The protest movement, angry at broken promises and large-scale public spending, has gained huge worldwide headlines and is giving considerable headaches to the

Discontent...protesters for social change in Sao Paulo make their feelings known about the World Cup coming to Brazil

"I thought his team were very good, got a lot of class. It's a pity he doesn't"

Tottenham Hotspur manager Tim Sherwood (far right) doesn't think much of his opposite number at Benfica, Jorge Jesus

authorities, to FIFA and to the sponsors. It will be very interesting to see if people are in the mood to put up the traditional street decorations.

And yet, for all the public discontent, there is clear evidence of considerable local enthusiasm for the tournament.

One of the triumphs of the 2014 World Cup has been ticket sales. Almost all the games are sold out – tickets shifted remarkably quickly when the "first come, first served" stage opened up on the internet on March 12.

By the end of the month more than 2.5million tickets had been allocated – and, by some considerable margin, Brazilians had bought more of them than any other nationality. For all the protests, a lot of people are very keen to be part of the World Cup atmosphere.

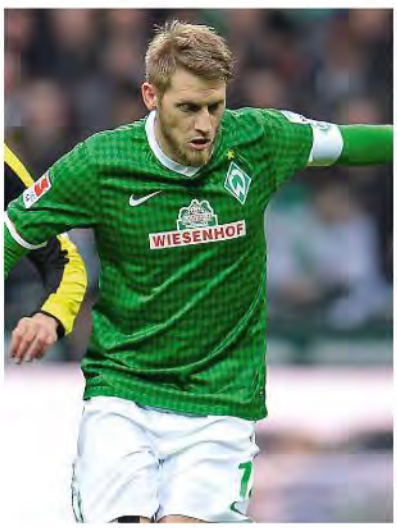
Should Brazil fall early, disappointment will add fuel to the fire of protest about the way the World Cup has been organised

The precise mood of the country during the tournament, then, is difficult to predict. It could be complex and contradictory, even schizophrenic. The power of the event will surely work its magic, the novelty presence of so many foreign fans will exert an influence, but the discontent is unlikely to disappear entirely.

Perhaps the most worrying situation for the authorities is the scenario in which the home team are eliminated early. Typically in such circumstances a national depression descends for a couple of days, then life moves on and millions switch off from the tournament.

This time things could work out differently. It is entirely possible that should Brazil fall early, disappointment with the team will add further fuel to the fire of protest about the way the World Cup has been organised – all part of the pressure on coach Luiz Felipe Scolari and his men. **WS**

HEROES & VILLAINS



Refreshing honesty...Hunt

AARON HUNT

Admitted to referee Manuel Grafe that no foul had been committed after the official awarded the Werder Bremen midfielder a penalty following a challenge by Nuremberg defender Javier Pinola.

ISSA BARADJI

The 18-year-old Ajaccio substitute scored two goals in three minutes on his Ligue 1 debut as a substitute to turn a 2-1 deficit away to Valenciennes into a 3-2 victory.

CRISTIANO RONALDO

The World Player of the Year paid the medical bills – of approximately €60,000 – for 10-month old Erik Ortiz Cruz who needed surgery after being born with cortical dysplasia, a brain disorder. The young boy's family wrote to Ronaldo asking him to donate items to auction off, but instead the Real Madrid and Portugal forward covered the cost himself.

JERMAIN DEFOE

Scored all three of Toronto's goals in their first two MLS games of the season, including two in the first 24 minutes of his debut to help them to a 2-1 season opening win at Seattle Sounders.

Spectacular start...Defoe

ANDRE MARRINER

The referee in the Premier League match between Chelsea and Arsenal sent off the wrong man when he gave a red card to Arsenal defender Kieran Gibbs, despite it being Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain who dived to palm away a shot, from Eden Hazard that was going wide anyway.

Wrong man...Marriner sends off Arsenal's Gibbs

CARSON YEUNG

The owner of English second-tier club Birmingham City was jailed for six years by a Hong Kong court for money laundering.

DANI BENITEZ

The Granada forward, on loan from Udinese, tested positive for cocaine following a home game against Real Betis in February. Both clubs said they would terminate his contract.

Drugs shame...Benitez

URAWA RED DIAMONDS

The J.League side were ordered to play their home game against Shimizu S.Pulse behind closed doors after a banner with the words "Japanese Only" was displayed at a Saitama stadium entrance during the 1-0 defeat by Sagan Tosu.

"Before internationals I would be taking drugs and partying with friends. Then days later I was trying to mark Lothar Matthaus or Ronaldinho"

Former New Zealand captain Chris Jackson, now working as a cleaner, reflects how addiction problems blighted his career

GOALS we'd like to see again

To see video footage of these goals, and many more that we have selected, scan the QR code using any free QR reader that can be downloaded to your smartphone. You can also see the videos by logging on to bit.ly/P9puKa.qrcode

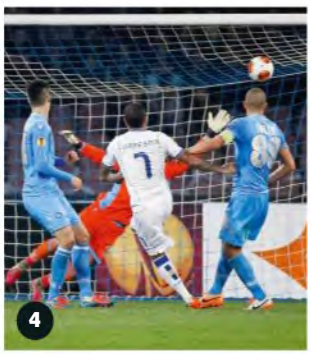
3

1 JUAN CUADRADO
Fiorentina v Chievo
Plays a one-two with David Pizarro before a lobbed volley beats the Chievo goalkeeper.

2 MOATAZ SALHANI
Al Wehdat v Al Ramtha
An amazing goal in the Jordanian Premier League as Salhani runs on to a through ball and backheels a high looping volley over the Al Ramtha goalkeeper.

3 ORLANDO ENGELAAR
Melbourne Heart v Central Coast Mariners
With the goalkeeper off his line, the Dutchman scores with a left-foot shot from inside his own half that doesn't bounce until it crosses the goal line.

4 RICARDO QUARESMA
Porto v Napoli
Some fancy footwork in the penalty area creates space to rifle a left-foot shot high into the net.



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5 ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI
Borussia Dortmund v Hanover
Dortmund counter-attack with Lewandowski down the left flank, before he cuts inside, beating five men and finishing with a low shot into the corner.

6 CHRISTIAN GIMENEZ
Cruz Azul v Sporting Kansas City
Gimenez flicks the ball up to Mauro Formica and then exchanges three headed passes with him before drilling a low shot into the bottom corner.

5

WINNERS

BAYERN MUNICH
Crowned German champions for a record 24th time – and with seven Bundesliga games to spare.

SALZBURG
Won the league championship with eight games to spare to set a record for the earliest Austrian title win.

STEFAN JOHANSEN
The Celtic midfielder won his second title in just over four months, having helped Stromsgodset to the Norwegian championship in November.

LOSERS

ARSENE WENGER
His 1,000th game in charge of Arsenal was ruined by a 6-0 thrashing away to Chelsea.

OLYMPIAKOS
Two-nil up from their home leg, the Greek side lost 3-0 away to Manchester United and exited 3-2 on aggregate in the Champions League round-of-16 stage.

AL AHLY
The Egyptian side, who were last year's African Champions League winners, failed to make the group stage of this season's competition.

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Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Moyes a victim of modern football's culture of instant gratification

Arsene Wenger delivers the phrase with a world-weary shrug of the shoulders and an unmistakable note of contempt in his voice. "Every defeat is a crisis" is his response when confronted by the overheated criticism that comes with a couple of average results.

It is the Arsenal manager's way of quietly mocking the culture of instant hate generated by intemperate modern crowds and media. "We are in a society where there are thousands of opinions every day," he says. "Some go for you, and some go against you.

"It is a period where every game is a definite judgement forever."

The words ring so true in describing this deeply unattractive and increasingly prevalent reality of modern football.

When Real Madrid lost two matches in succession recently, after a stupendous run of form, their supporters' immediate reaction was to jeer Cristiano Ronaldo, scorer of a mere 44 goals in 40 games at that stage of the season.

Another Premier League manager to suffer along with Wenger in the past few weeks has been David Moyes, who has had a tricky start at Manchester United.

It was always going to be tough for the man who followed the 25-year reign of the incomparable Alex Ferguson, and Moyes knew this only too well when he accepted the task. Yet the intensity of the process surprised many observers.

Each defeat was a crisis. A decent victory took the hounds off his back. The next defeat prompted another monumental crisis. Another win lifted the pressure...

Never mind the obvious structural problems in the squad: a swiftly ageing defence, a lack of creative midfielders and persistent injuries to key striker Robin Van Persie among others. Never mind, too, the requirement to overhaul the club's scouting structure. Just find a scapegoat and any way to blame him.

One group of fans decided on the crass stunt of flying a "Wrong one, Moyes out" banner over the stadium during a home match against Aston Villa. But this, thankfully, backfired and instead there was a welcome outbreak of courtesy, respect and loyalty. The fans inside Old Trafford sang in praise of their manager and the team triumphed 4-1.

What should be obvious – but plainly isn't to some – is that Moyes ought to be given time to impose himself and his ideas at United. That takes more than a few months; it cannot be instant. The careers of both Ferguson and Wenger illustrate this perfectly, as does the superb long-term work done by Moyes during his 11 years at Everton – which is why he was appointed on the advice of his predecessor. For United to waste all the lessons learned by Moyes in his first season, never mind his transfer planning, would be folly.

> What should be obvious – but plainly isn't to some – is that Moyes ought to be given time

Moyes is one of the most thoughtful, committed, decent and rigorous managers you will come across. He does not deserve the scorn that has flowed his way.

Sadly, the courage to hold your nerve at a major football club has become harder than ever in the age of social media. Vicious, cruel and daft comment can be sent instantly around the world, and the most virulent is likely to be picked up by the mainstream media and further magnified.

It is a destructive process for modern sport, and particularly football. The head of communications at one major English club told me he is the only senior person there to have an account on Twitter. He receives incessant and shocking abuse every day.

Long gone are the days when Moyes began his managerial career at Preston North End in the late 1990s and he could deal with criticism in person. Once, after the team had lost a few matches, his postbag was full of letters demanding an explanation. One vociferous supporter had put his address on the top and Moyes drove to the house, knocked on the door, and won him over with a reasoned conversation over a cup of tea. **WS**

OBITUARIES

Champions...Bellini (left) with coach Vicente Feola

HILDERALDO BELLINI (1930-2014)
The captain of Brazil's first World Cup-winning side was the 11th of 12 children born to an immigrant Italian truck driver. He began his career as a full-back with local clubs Itapirense and Sanjoanense and then turned professional with Rio's Vasco da Gama, where he was converted into a central defender by coach Flavio Costa.

He played 51 times for Brazil, between 1957 and 1966, skippering the team to glory in 1958 as they beat hosts Sweden 5-2 in the Final with two goals from the 17-year-old Pele.

Four years later, in Chile, Bellini was replaced as centre-back and captain by Mauro, of Santos, although he remained a member of the World Cup-winning squad. He was there again in England for the 1966 finals, where he made his last international appearance for his country.

RENE LLENSE (1913-2014)
Capped 11 times in goal by France, he represented his country at the 1934 and 1938 World Cups, and was a domestic double winner with Sete in 1934.

Domestic double winner...Llense (centre)

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"If I'm not picked for the World Cup, I'll just go on holiday by the sea. I won't be picking up the telephone to try and convince him"

Carlos Tevez admits he is fighting an uphill battle to persuade Argentina coach Alejandro Sabella to pick him for Brazil this summer

15 MATCHES THAT MATTERED

Recent crunch games from around the globe

ATLETICO MADRID 4
MILAN 1
Atletico reached the quarter-finals of the Champions League for the first time in 17 years thanks to goals from Diego Costa (two), Arda Turan and Raul Garcia.

OLYMPIAKOS 2
PANTHRAKIKOS 0
Goals from Nelson Haedo Valdez and David Fuster, with a penalty, secured a fourth consecutive Greek Super League title for the club from Piraeus.

MANCHESTER UNITED 0
LIVERPOOL 3
Steven Gerrard scored two penalties, and missed a third, as David Moyes' side lost for the fifth time at home in the Premier League this season.

ABERDEEN 0
INVERNESS CT 0
(aet, Aberdeen won on penalties)
Adam Rooney scored the winning spot-kick in the Scottish League Cup Final as Aberdeen ended a 19-year trophy drought.

FIORENTINA 0
JUVENTUS 1
Andrea Pirlo scored a stunning free-kick to give the Turin club a 2-1 aggregate win against their Serie A rivals and book a place in the Europa League quarter-finals.

NAPOLI 2
PORTO 2
Rafa Benitez's hopes of winning the Europa League for the third time with three different clubs ended with two second-half Porto goals in seven minutes.

CHELSEA 6
ARSENAL 0
Chelsea led 2-0 inside seven minutes and heaped more misery on Arsene Wenger, who was celebrating his 1,000th match as Arsenal manager.

SALZBURG 5
WIENER NEUSTADT 0
Salzburg wrapped up the Austrian Bundesliga in record time, clinching their eighth domestic championship with eight games to spare.

MANCHESTER UNITED 0
MANCHESTER CITY 3
City won at Old Trafford for a third consecutive season, beating their Premier League neighbours with goals from Edin Dzeko (two) and Yaya Toure.

HERTHA BERLIN 1
BAYERN MUNICH 3
Bayern's record-breaking season continued with a 52nd consecutive game unbeaten in the Bundesliga to secure a 24th German championship.

PARTICK THISTLE 1
CELTIC 5
Victory gave the visitors their third successive Scottish Premier League title – and 45th championship in total – with seven games to spare.

SEVILLA 2
REAL MADRID 1
Carlo Ancelotti's team recorded back-to-back La Liga defeats in the space of four days when they went down to two goals from Carlos Bacca.

Paul GARDNER

THE WORLDWIDE VIEW

Andre Marriner made a mistake. Get over it...

English referee Andre Marriner has been subjected to a heap of criticism and ridicule of late, none of which is justified. If anything, Marriner is actually the victim in the now notorious mistaken-identity case involving Arsenal's Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Kieran Gibbs. And it is up to the game itself to make sure that such mix-ups don't happen again.

Having those extra officials on the goal line would probably have helped in this particular case, but a simpler identity aid would be to insist that players wear numbers on the front of their shirts: medium-sized numbers, say eight inches high. And one has to ask – for the umpteenth time – why the match officials should be barred from having access to vital information from TV that would resolve the error; information that virtually everyone else in the world can call up immediately.

Getting no help at all, Marriner was allowed to proceed with a totally avoidable error. Marriner then – according to the FA – made another mistake.

The red card he gave on the play, said the FA, was incorrect. They investigated and decided that the shot by Chelsea's Eden Hazard was going wide. Therefore, Oxlade-Chamberlain's handball had not prevented a goal, and the clause in Rule 12 that demands a red card for a player "denying the opposing team a goal...by deliberately handling the ball" did not apply.

The FA, of course, arrived at its verdict by using TV technology – the very evidence that was denied to Marriner at the Chelsea versus Arsenal game. That is undeniably re-refereeing the game, which everyone insists is unacceptable.

During the course of a tense game, Marriner was being asked to make an instant judgment to predict the exact flight of a rapidly moving ball. Would the ball enter the goal? Would it hit the post? Those are precisely the millimetric assessments that, when it comes to goalscoring, the sport has decided a referee cannot be relied on to get right. Hence the introduction of the highly expensive goal decision system (GDS).

Marriner – still getting no help from elsewhere – made his judgment and got it wrong. Well, so what?

The referee is the man who matters. He's the one that has been appointed to make the decisions. We should go with his decision. Especially so when we are, quite deliberately, withholding help.

No doubt Marriner was greatly influenced in arriving at his decision by the action of Oxlade-Chamberlain, who dived prodigiously to tip the ball away. So Oxlade-Chamberlain clearly thought the ball was going in – and was quite willing to cheat to stop it doing so.

And what ends up happening?

Oxlade-Chamberlain, the cheat, has got away with his actions. There was no red card and no suspension for the Arsenal player. While Marriner, having made an honest judgment based on the information that was available to him at the time is publicly belittled by the FA.

> If anything, Marriner is the victim in the mistaken-identity case involving Oxlade-Chamberlain and Gibbs

And, with the stealthy, sinuous ramifications of technology in football beginning to show their effect, is it now logical that GDS should only be applied to goalscoring? Could it not be adapted to tell us which shots are on goal? If so, why not use it?

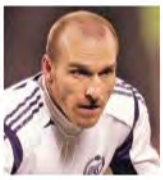
More to the point, if IFAB and FIFA decide not to use it, is it right to allow a review board to use it and then upbraid a referee for not getting the call right?

To use an old-fashioned, non-technological concept: is all of this actually fair to the referee? Particularly when it comes from FIFA, which likes to promote the concept of fair play... **WS**

REAL BETIS 0
SEVILLA 2
(2-2 on agg, Sevilla won on pens)
Having lost the home leg 2-0, Sevilla beat their neighbours away and reached the Europa League quarter-finals on penalties.

REAL MADRID 3
BARCELONA 3
A Lionel Messi hat-trick secured victory against Real in "*el clasico*" as the visitors come from behind in the Bernabeu. (see *Dispatches*, pages 36)

ATLETICO PARANAENSE 1
VELEZ SARSFIELD 3
The Argentinian side secured their place in the knockout stage of the Libertadores Cup with a convincing victory against Atletico in Brazil.



"Just before the game, we were informed that if each of us gave the referee US$3,000 we would win the game"

Ex-Zenit defender Erik Hagen reveals how his old club allegedly "bought" an unspecified Europa League game between 2005 and 2008

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

In at Stuttgart...Stevens

EUROPE

Stuttgart made their second coaching change of the season, replacing Thomas Schneider with **HUUB STEVENS** after a run of nine Bundesliga games without a win. Schneider took over from Bruno Labbadia in August. Stevens left Greek club PAOK the previous week and was succeeded by **GIORGOS GEORGIADIS.**

Hamburg have agreed to turn the season-long loan of Arsenal and Switzerland defender **JOHAN DJOUROU** into a permanent move in July.

Former Albania international **BESNIK HASI** took charge of Anderlecht after the Belgian club sacked John Van den Brom following a 1-0 defeat at Leuven.

Anderlecht switch...Hasi

COSMIN CONTRA quit Romanian club Petrolul Ploiesti to join struggling Spanish side Getafe, who parted company with Luis Garcia after a 2-0 defeat at rock-bottom Real Betis left them a point above the relegation zone and without a league win since November.

DWIGHT LODEWEGES will replace Marco Van Basten as coach of Dutch side Heerenveen next season after standing down at Cambuur.

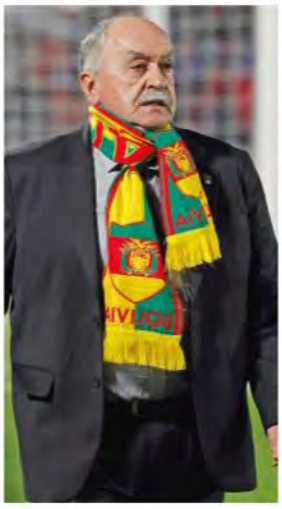
Former Angola coach **LITO VIDIGAL** took charge of Portuguese relegation-battlers Belenenses.

Former Czech Republic coach **JOZEF CHOVANEC** was hired by Slovak club Ruzomberok following the dismissal of Jozef Vukusic.

SOUTH AMERICA

JOSE DEL SOLAR took charge of Peruvian club Universitario, replacing **ANGEL COMIZZO** who became coach of Mexican side Morelia.

XABIER AZKARGORTA stepped down as coach of Bolivia's national team to take over at club side Bolivar.



Country to club...Azkargorta

CONCACAF

Former Colorado Rapids captain **PABLO MASTROENI** was appointed coach of the MLS side.

RICARDO LA VOLPE, who led Mexico to victory in the 2003 CONCACAF Gold Cup and the last 16 at the 2006 World Cup, replaced Jose Luis Real as coach of Guadalajara.

AFRICA

Former Belgium and Algeria coach **GEORGES LEEKENS** has taken charge of Tunisia's national team. **DIDIER OLLE-NICOLLE**, who parted company with French lower-league club Rouen in September, was appointed coach of Benin.

Six-times Zambian Premier League champions Zanaco appointed **AGGREY CHIYANGI** as coach before the start of the new season.

ASIA

Qatar move...Belmadi

Former Algeria international **DJAMEL BELMADI** was named coach of Qatar, replacing Fahad Thani who takes charge of the country's Olympic squad.

Caretaker coach **JOHN VAN'T SCHIP** signed a three-year permanent deal with A-League Melbourne Heart, up to the end of the 2016-17 season.

Villas-Boas signs up for Zenit

Former Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea manager **ANDRE VILLAS-BOAS** signed a two-year deal to coach Zenit after the Russian club dismissed Italian boss Luciano Spalletti following a run of just one win in 11 competitive games.

Spalletti, the former Udinese and Roma coach, had led Zenit to two league titles and the Russian Cup. He was Russia's coach of the season in 2010 and 2012.

Russian project...Villas-Boas

"The Arsenal model is one we should look at with interest, one of less sporting success but with more spectacle and commercial success"

Milan co- chief executive Barbara Berlusconi

Appointments, sackings and loans

OUT

Exit...Karpin

EUROPE

West Bromwich Albion sacked French striker **NICOLAS ANELKA** after the 35-year-old walked out on the Premier League side. He claimed to have terminated his own contract after being banned for five games for his "quenelle" gesture.

ULI HOENESS stepped down as Bayern Munich president after being jailed for three-and-a-half years for tax evasion. (See *Dispatches*, page 33)

Borussia Dortmund captain **SEBASTIAN KEHL** will retire after next season.

Spartak Moscow parted company with coach **VALERI KARPIN** after exiting the Russian Cup to third division Tosno then drawing with the top flight's bottom side Anzhi.

BERNARD CASONI was sacked as coach of Auxerre with the club just one point above the second tier's relegation zone.

Levski Sofia coach **ANTONI ZDRAVKOV** quit after defeat by Botev Plovdiv in the quarter-finals of the Bulgarian Cup.

SOUTH AMERICA

Former Brazil playmaker **RIVALDO,** a World Cup winner in 2002, has retired at the age of 41. He most recently played for third-tier Mogi Mirim alongside his 18-year-old son, Rivaldo Jnr.

CONCACAF

After 15 seasons in the Bundesliga with Hanover and 87 USA caps, 35-year-old defender **STEVE CHERUNDOLO** announced his retirement.

AFRICA

Promoted Nakuru AllStars sacked German coach **OLIVER PAGE** after losing their opening three Kenyan Premier League games.

ASIA

Melbourne Heart's **HARRY KEWELL** will retire at the end of the A-League season. The 35-year-old, who played for Leeds United, Liverpool and Galatasaray, won 56 Australia caps, scoring 17 goals.

Chivu calls it a day

Former Romania defender **CRISTIAN CHIVU** has confirmed his retirement from football after agreeing to cancel his contract with Internazionale. The 33-year-old had been struggling with a foot injury all season and had not played a single match.

Chivu had spells with Ajax and Roma before joining Inter in 2007, helping them to win three Serie A titles, as well as the Champions League, two Italian Cups and the Club World Cup.

Plagued by injury...Chivu

WORLD CUP 2014 UPDATE

Sprained knee...Van Persie

Holland striker **ROBIN VAN PERSIE** faces a battle to be fit after a sprained knee looks like ruling the Manchester United striker out of the rest of the Premier League campaign. **KEVIN STROOTMAN** will definitely miss out this summer after he was carried off with a knee-ligament injury after just 12 minutes of Roma's game against Napoli. (see *Dispatches*, page 32).

CHRISTIAN BENTEKE of Aston Villa is out of Belgium's squad after tearing an Achilles in training. The striker is expected to be sidelined for up to eight months.

FRANCESCO TOTTI, who quit international football a year after winning the 2006 World Cup with Italy, has said he would "be proud" to return to the fold if national coach Cesare Prandelli called up Roma's 37-year old attacking midfielder.

A specialist in London has told **BRYAN OVIEDO** of Costa Rica that he will be ready for the finals despite breaking the tibia and fibula in his left leg in January.

VICTOR VALDES of Spain is out of the finals after the Barcelona goalkeeper suffered an anterior-cruciate-ligament injury in his right knee. Under-21 striker **JESE**, who had been tipped as a possible contender for the senior squad this summer, has also been ruled out until next season after tearing anterior cruciate ligaments in his right knee during Real Madrid's Champions League victory over Schalke.

Agony...Valdes is carried off

Brian GLANVILLE

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Scholes was harsh on Arsenal but the buck stops with Wenger

People who live in (Manchester United) glass houses shouldn't throw stones, and Paul Scholes threw a fusillade of them against Arsenal.

Among his charges were: "For one reason or another, players just seem to go missing...it seems like they go on the pitch with no discipline. It's almost as if they say, 'You four, five midfielders, go out there, do what you want. Try to score a goal, a few little nice one-twos, a bit of tippy-tappy football. Don't bother running back.'"

He went on to add: "I don't know if that's what the manager does. It just seems that way. They just seem to be midfielder players with no discipline. There are no leaders. These, they go 2-0 down, they just carry on what they are doing. When we played Arsenal it was really tough. You play them now, you think just get stuck in and you've won the game...[Jack Wilshere] doesn't look any better now than he did at 17."

Harsh words, but Scholes doesn't mention Arsene Wenger. Surely the buck stops there and the fact that Arsenal still seem disposed to offer their manager a new contract worth £8million a year defies all logic. A 6-0 thrashing at Manchester City, a 5-1 drubbing at Liverpool, a 6-0 annihilation at Chelsea – no manager of any major Italian club would have survived that.

That Wenger rejuvenated and revitalised Arsenal – with his training methods, his diet, the move to newer, more spacious and commodious quarters at London Colney, with his acquisition of such as Patrick Vieira, with his inspired transformation of Cesc Fabregas to Vieira's unexpected heir in midfield – is a phenomenal achievement. But Wenger isn't Alex Ferguson, a unique managerial figure who guided and inspired Manchester United for decades. Ferguson even went out after all those years with a bang, with a final Premier League title.

> The fact that Arsenal seem disposed to offer Wenger an £8m-a-year contract defies all logic

True, since the arrival of David Moyes things have disintegrated. Perhaps it is arguable not even Ferguson could have kept them together. The supporters have turned not only against Moyes but also Ferguson for appointing him.

I have always thought, unconsciously or not, Ferguson picked Moyes, a fine middle-of-the-road manager with a solid middle-of-the-table team, rather than Jose Mourinho or the like who might outshine him.

Taken apart...Arsenal's players look shell-shocked after conceding another goal in their 6-0 drubbing away to Chelsea

Is the end in sight for FIFA?

Heads...(from left) Johansson, Blatter and Havelange

Could it happen? Could it blessedly be true? Could a knowledgeable insider be right when he warned that, were it to go down over the Qatar corruption scandal then, for all its immense resources FIFA could simply be wiped out?

"FIFA must be made to clean up its corruption," said *The Daily Telegraph*, the paper that broke the scandal.

Ever since Joao Havelange deposed Stanley Rous, FIFA has been endemically, even irredeemably, corrupt. And in those inglorious 24 years of Havelange, FIFA as a body went passively, submissively and inexcusably along with him.

Havelange knowingly and cynically spread wealth around, ensuring that a host of small, dependent federations would be in thrall to him. But alas, they were not the only ones. And while we know pretty well how Havelange beat Rous in 1974 in Frankfurt – paying with funds, allegedly from the Brazilian federation, for African representatives to fly to Frankfurt to vote for him – how the egregious Sepp Blatter managed to succeed him in 1998 remains an abiding mystery. The presidency seemed comfortably wrapped up for Sweden's Lennart Johansson when suddenly there came a late flood of votes for Blatter, Havelange's right-hand man. Lo and behold, Blatter won the presidency – and he has stayed there ever since.

Before the 2002 election, the English delegate Adam Crozier spoke up loud and clear against Blatter but in vain. Against negligible opposition Blatter remained in office after which there ensued a "Night of the Long Knives", in which not only officials at FIFA who had opposed him were sacked, but even those who hadn't actively supported him.

> Ever since Havelenge deposed Rous, FIFA has been endemically corrupt

Julio Grondona of Argentina is one of those who remain at the top FIFA table. How predictable that he should try to eject the New York lawyer, Michael Garcia, who is leading an investigation into the scandal over Jack Warner and the alleged bribery which got Qatar the 2022 World Cup. And we have yet to hear just how Russia, with its endemic racism in football, was chosen for 2018.

Good luck to Garcia, but only the demise of FIFA can clean up the game.

Disapproval...Allardyce cups an ear to booing West Ham fans after the win against Hull

Pragmatic Peters neglects West Ham's history

To boo or not to boo? Sam Allardyce, that large, tough, resilient figure, was hurt when West Ham United fans booed him and his team off the pitch after a scruffy 2-1 win against a Hull City side reduced to 10 men after the expulsion of goalkeeper Allan McGregor.

Steve Bruce, the Hull manager, contested the sending-off and pointed out that the referee missed a handling offence in the build-up to the goal.

Allardyce said after the game that he had never been booed after a win before, so good for him.

Martin Peters, once such a star for West Ham and England, has come strongly to the defence of Allardyce, taking the pragmatic line that at such a stage of the season, with relegation ever a dire possibility, a victory is a victory, however obtained.

A little strange to hear such a philosophy from one who was so central a figure in Ron Greenwood's academy of arts and football sciences.

Not Leonardo's finest hour

Leonardo, once a Brazilian international star and subsequently a coach whose last port of call was as director of football at Paris Saint-Germain, recently appeared on the *Match of the Day* panel. So alas did Russell Brand, a cheap gimmick not worthy of the programme, nor of Gary Lineker's amiable treatment of the man who played that odious joke on poor Andrew Sachs.

Leonardo spoke decent English, made cogent comments and is reportedly being pursued for World Cup appearances by British television.

Yet am I alone in remembering one shocking incident in his playing career? When, in the 1994 World Cup, Brazil encountered the USA and Leonardo, with a brutal blow of the elbow, fractured the skull of America's key player, the talented Tab Ramos, who was carried off and fortunately survived.

Leonardo was sent off but without Ramos, USA posed no real threat and Brazil won a shabby victory. Since when Leonardo has largely flourished. Lest we forget.

Shameful...Leonardo's brutal challenge sends Ramos crashing at USA 94

North-south divide

Newcastle United manager Alan Pardew has opined that Southampton have flourished because, in its southern area, it can deploy young players from decent educational backgrounds. The corollary being that a team such as his Newcastle cannot compete because their northern English players are too thick.

Yet when Newcastle lost heavily at St Mary's recently, 10 of the players they deployed were foreign. For that matter, did Chelsea's John Terry obtain an Oxford degree, and how highly educated was England's most dazzlingly creative player for years, Paul Gascoigne? **WS**

● Brian Glanville's *The Story of the World Cup* is out now (Faber & Faber, £14.99)

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Chelsea: in bed with Vitesse?

The Dutch FA has launched an investigation into Vitesse's links with Chelsea, putting feeder and nursery clubs firmly in the spotlight. Nick Bidwell reports

Arrangement...(left to right) Atsu, Piazon, Van Aanholt and Traore are currently on loan at Vitesse from Chelsea

Whether a legal document signed in triplicate and underlined in blood or an informal "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" gentleman's agreement, the concept of feeder and nursery clubs can take many forms.

They also serve all manner of purposes: a way to give first-team experience to youngsters; somewhere to "park" stockpiled players; as a breeding ground for emerging talent in the Third World; a wage-reduction strategy; a ploy to bypass work-permit regulations; or a brand and merchandising push.

In extreme circumstances, the satellite system can even morph into an empire-building exercise – and this undeniably holds true for Belgian automotive technology tycoon, Roland Duchatelet, who currently has no fewer than six European clubs in his portfolio, in varying forms.

Rescued from bankruptcy

Reported to be worth €400million, Duchatelet made his first football acquisition a decade ago, rescuing Flemish side Sint-Truiden from the jaws of bankruptcy. However, only in the last three years has he, one by one, taken control of Belgian soccer institution Standard Liege, famous old Budapest club Ujpest, former East German heavyweights Carl-Zeiss Jena, Charlton Athletic in south London and Spanish second division side Alcorcon.

> "Duchatelet wants to prove he can create a productive economic model in football"
> Former Sint-Truiden marketing manager, Geert Smets

Duchatelet's modus operandi is well established. He purchases a financially ailing club, brings rigour to the balance sheet, makes some smart real-estate investments in and around the stadium, and generally uses his web of teams as a self-contained player carousel, forever switching individuals from one part of

the stable to another.

In positioning Standard Liege at the hub of the wheel and fixing five modest satellite sides around them, Duchatelet finds himself not only able to shuffle contracted players around his own personal circuit but also protected from the excessive bills of agents.

Some have suggested that Duchatelet only buys clubs in places where he has business interests, and bearing in mind his commercial presence in Hungary and eastern Germany it is a theory which holds much water. But according to Geert Smets, the ex-marketing manager at Sint-Truiden, there is much more to his old boss' strategy than cultivating contacts and making PR gestures.

"As far as I can see, Duchatelet wants to prove that he can create a productive economic model in football," declared Smets in an interview with Belgium's *Foot Magazine* earlier this year. "And to achieve this, he accumulates clubs.

"He has constructed a network of teams which he controls and in which he is free to place players where he wants – always with the aim of increasing their market value.

"It's an economic model like any other, but it's the only one in football which produces profits.

"What to do when even the top-four in a championship lose money? You turn to player transactions. It's not new. It's always existed."

And with Standard currently setting the pace in the Belgian championship, it's a system that is obviously working.

Not that Duchatelet is the only entrepreneur who is into multiple-club ownership.

Long-time Udinese president Giampaolo Pozzo has in the past five years added La Liga outfit Granada and English second-tier side Watford to his fiefdom, sending high-quality loanees to Andalucia and Hertfordshire.

Collector...English second-tier side Charlton Athletic are the latest addition to Duchatelet's portfolio of European football clubs

English addition...Giampaolo Pozzo (right) and his son, Gino, at Watford

Meanwhile, Cardiff City's Malaysian owner Vincent Tan recently purchased leading Bosnian team Sarajevo. "We plan to play friendly games, exchange players and organise joint training camps and marketing campaigns," Tan told Sarajevo daily newspaper *Dnevni Avaz*.

Elsewhere in Belgium, a remarkable story is developing in Eupen, close to the German border.

> "We will play friendlies and exchange players"
>
> Vincent Tan, owner of Cardiff City and Sarajevo

Two years ago, the local club, who were struggling in the Belgian second tier after relegation from the top flight, were bought by the Aspire Foundation, the Qatar-founded youth academy.

The Aspire "project" played an important part in winning hearts and minds in Qatar's winning bid to host the 2022 World Cup. And now many of the most promising African-born graduates from the Aspire academy in Doha have been transferred to Eupen.

Coached by a Spaniard, Tintin Marquez, the multi-national team were second in the league this season with five matches remaining, and in strong contention for promotion.

Eupen's squad is dominated by young players from Africa - notably Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Mali and Cameroon – with many still teenagers who could be at the peak of their powers if and when Qatar hosts the World Cup in 2022.

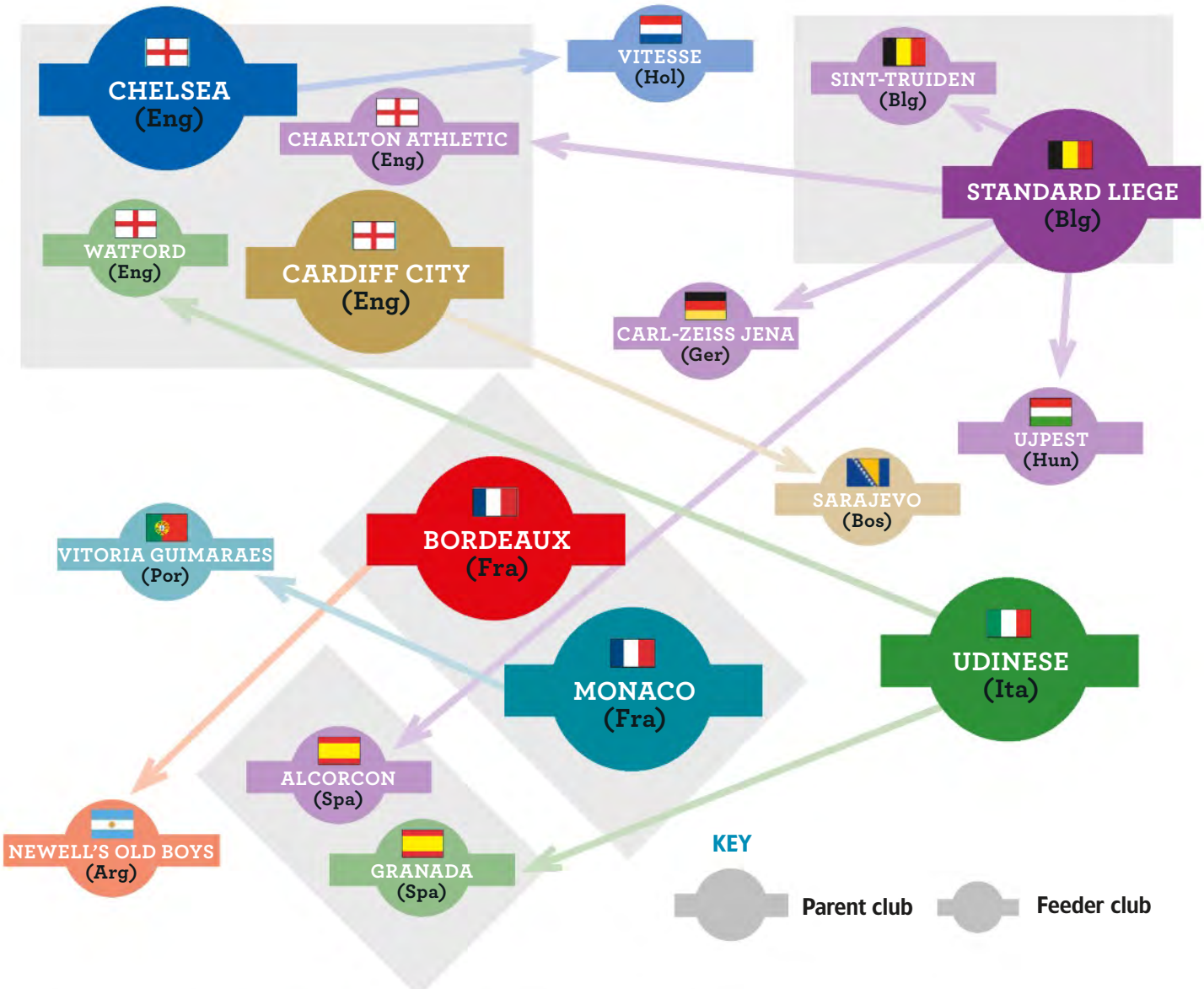
It is not hard to envisage a situation where a group of players, raised by the Aspire academy system and hardened by playing European football, form the backbone of a Qatar side in 2022.

Symbiotic relationship

English side Chelsea and Dutch club Vitesse from Arnhem are two clubs with a symbiotic relationship. Although not officially linked to the Stamford Bridge outfit, Vitesse have been working hand-in-glove with the Londoners since 2010, effectively becoming the Premier League giant's finishing school.

Of the 28 players that Chelsea have out on loan at the moment, no fewer than four of them – forwards Lucas Piazon and Christian Atsu, midfielder Bertrand Traore and defender Patrick Van Aanholt – are currently playing for Vitesse. Three others – Gael Kakuta, Sam Hutchinson and Cristian Cuevas – spent the start of this season at the GelreDome prior to being posted out

WHERE PARENT CLUBS ARE CURRENTLY SENDING THEIR PLAYERS



Blues brothers...Piazon (right) and Van Aanholt celebrate at Vitesse

on loan elsewhere.

Co-operation is not just linked to loan deals. Chelsea signed defender Marco Van Ginkel from Vitesse last summer, a move that frustrated Ajax, who were keen on the player. Ajax sporting director Marc Overmars complained that his club had been denied the opportunity to speak to Van Ginkel because of Chelsea's "co-operation agreement" with Vitesse.

On the face of it, everyone wins. Chelsea's fledglings feast on a nourishing diet of first-team football in the Eredivisie, while Vitesse enjoy cut-price use of some of the world's most promising prospects – an injection of class which has them challenging for a Champions League spot this season.

However, dig a little below the surface and long-term doubts do come to light. By relying so heavily on Chelsea starlets, Vitesse simply have no need to build up their own academy. And just how highly do Chelsea really value the fruits of their youth programme? Thus far, not one of their Vitesse loanees has returned to south-west London to grab a first-team slot.

With Vitesse owners – first Georgian agent Merab Jordania, then Russian billionaire Aleksandr Chigirinski, who are thought to be close associates of Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich – both parties have sung from the same hymn sheet. Marina Granovskaia, Abramovich's key advisor at Chelsea, is also reported to have an important role at Vitesse.

But fissures in the edifice are now starting to appear.

Jordania, Vitesse's president from 2010 to 2013, has just gone public with claims that Chelsea exerted undue influence at the Arnhem club, even to the point of trying to stop the Eredivisie

Speaking out...ex-Vitesse president Jordania

club reaching the Champions League.

"I wanted to reach for the title, but 'London' didn't want that in the end," Jordania told *De Telegraaf*. "Ambition is fine, but Vitesse is not allowed to get to the Champions League. I will tell you why [coach] Fred Rutten left [last summer]. He knew he wasn't permitted to win the title with Vitesse.

"In the winter we had the team flying high. We were convinced we needed one more player to take the title, Kelvin Leerdam. The transfer seemed a done deal when all of a sudden, 'London' intervened. We were not allowed to be too strong.

"I couldn't explain that to Fred. I had to cover the club and 'London'."

In response to Jordania's comments, the Dutch FA launched an investigation into the ownership structure of Vitesse. UEFA rules state that two clubs under the same ownership cannot play in the same competition.

Chelsea deny the allegations and make the point that Champions League experience would only improve their Vitesse loanees. All the same, it's messy and unseemly.

Calmer waters

In France, Ligue 1 clubs, Bordeaux and Monaco must hope that they have calmer nursery-club waters in which to swim. Late last year Bordeaux signed a youth-development agreement with a leading Argentinian top-flight side, Newell's Old Boys, while Monaco have gone into an exchange of personnel partnership with Portuguese outfit Vitoria Guimaraes.

However, clubs are obliged to comply with international regulations preventing the transfer of minors, especially in light of the transfer ban imposed on Spanish champions Barcelona by FIFA.

Barcelona are planning to appeal against their ban, but nursery and feeder clubs are likely to be a prominent feature on football's transfer landscape for many years to come. WS

CHELSEA'S LOAN ARRANGEMENTS

Chelsea currently have 28 players loaned out to other European clubs, including four at Vitesse

Kurt Zouma
Signed from Saint-Etienne in January 2014, loaned back until the end of the season.

Christian Atsu
Winger signed from Porto last summer, loaned to Vitesse for this season.

Highly rated winger...Atsu

Matej Delac
Goalkeeper signed from Inter Zapresic in 2010. Loaned to Vitesse, then had spells with four different teams before joining Sarajevo this term.

Thorgan Hazard
Younger brother of Eden, on season-long loan to former club Zulte Waregem.

Family affair...Hazard

Thibaut Courtois
Goalkeeper who is currently in his second season on loan to Atletico Madrid.

Todd Kane
Right-back, on season-long loan at Blackburn Rovers.

Billy Clifford
Midfielder at Antwerp since January 2014.

Wallace
Brazilian on season-loan at Internazionale.

Kenneth Omeruo
Nigerian defender previously loaned to Standard Liege and Den Haag, now at Middlesbrough until the season's end.

Nathaniel Chalobah
Midfielder who was at Watford last season, and loaned to Nottingham Forest and Middlesbrough this term.

Betrand Traore
Joined in January 2014 when he turned 18, currently on loan to Vitesse.

George Saville
Midfielder on loan at Brentford, previously loaned to Millwall.

Ulises Davila
Mexican signed in 2011 and loaned to Vitesse. Currently loaned to Cordoba in Spain.

Milan Lalkovic
Slovakian-born winger who has spent the 2013-14 season at Walsall. Previously loaned to Doncaster, Den Haag and Vitoria Guimaraes.

Cristian Cuevas
Chilean attacker signed in 2013 and loaned to Vitesse. Currently at FC Eindhoven.

Jhon Pirez
Uruguayan on loan at Spanish third-tier side Leganes.

Patrick Bamford
Striker in second season at MK Dons.

Stipe Perica
Croatian striker currently out on a season long loan at NAC in Holland.

Patrick Van Aanholt
Defender on loan at Vitesse. Previously loaned to four English clubs.

Lucas Piazon
Brazilian attacker on loan at Vitesse. Previously loaned to Malaga in Spain.

Ryan Bertrand
England full-back loaned to Aston Villa in January 2014.

Gael Kakuta
Spent first half of season at Vitesse, now at Lazio. Previously loaned to Fulham, Bolton Wanderers and Dijon,

Sam Hutchinson
Defender loaned to Sheffield Wednesday in January. Previously loaned to Vitesse.

Marko Marin
German attacker on season-long loan to Sevilla.

Josh McEachran
Midfielder on loan at Wigan Athletic, spent last season at Middlesbrough.

Romelu Lukaku
Striker on loan at Everton, spent last season at WBA.

In-form striker...Lukaku

Victor Moses
On season-long loan at Liverpool.

Oriol Romeu
Midfielder on season-long loan at Valencia.

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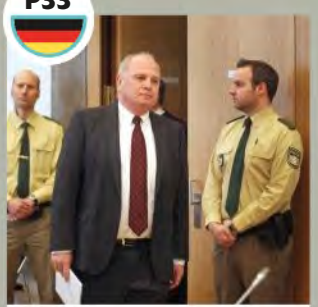

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OLEG ZAVERNOVSKY
in Kiev

Premier League's Crimea crisis

Russian intervention in the peninsula causes sporting chaos

Russia's annexation of Crimea is set to have huge sporting repercussions, with Sevastopol and Tavriya Simferopol both likely to end their participation in the Ukrainian Premier League at the end of this season with the aim of joining the Russian Football Union.

The civil unrest which began in Kiev and led to the overthrow of the Ukrainian government began very close to the Dynamo Kiev stadium that bears the name of the club's famous coach from years ago, Valeriy Lobanovskyi. His statue happened to be located directly between the demonstrators and the riot police during the protests, and it was heavily damaged when one group threw Molotov cocktails and the other responded with grenades. And the road leading to the Dynamo offices, close to the so-called "Government district", was blocked by barricades built by protesters.

At the time, the Dynamo squad were at a training camp in Spain and on their return to Kiev they discovered that their Europa League tie against Valencia had been moved to Cyprus. Nearly 50,000 Dynamo supporters who had bought tickets for the game were forced to watch on TV as Oleh Blokhin's side were beaten 2-0 in Limassol.

The return leg in Spain ended 0-0 and Dynamo exited the Europa League at the round-of-32 stage, along with fellow Ukrainian clubs Chornomorets, Dnipro and Shakhtar Donetsk – whose coach, Mircea Lucescu, said of his side's 3-2 aggregate defeat by modest Viktoria Plzen: "The players are worried about their families and their future. They were not concentrating on football."

Grim...protesters man the barricades outside Dynamo Kiev's stadium

More than a game

Football in the former Soviet Union was always more than just a game for the leaders of the respective republics who used it to further their own interests. In Ukraine, the achievements of Dynamo Kiev during the Soviet era were shared equally by coach Lobanovskyi and the head of Ukraine's communists, Volodymyr Shcherbytsky – who sanctioned Lobanovskyi's move from Dnipro to Dynamo in 1973.

"I was ordered by Shcherbytsky to invite Lobanovskyi from Dnipropetrovsk to give a presentation to the Politburo about Dynamo," recalls Yakov Pogrebniyak, who was one of the highest-ranking members of Ukraine's Communist Party and personally responsible for Dynamo. "He agreed but requested investment in the

LOCATION OF THIS SEASON'S UKRAINIAN TOP-FLIGHT TEAMS

1	Chornomorets (Odessa)
2	Dnipro (Dnipropetrovsk)
3	Dynamo (Kiev)
4	Hoverla (Uzhhorod)
5	Illichivets (Mariupol)
6	Karpaty (Lviv)
7	Metalist (Kharkiv)
8	Metalurh Donetsk
	Shakhtar Donetsk
9	Metalurh Zaporizhya
10	Sevastopol
11	Tavriya (Simferopol)
12	Volyn (Lutsk)
13	Vorskla (Poltava)
14	Zorya (Luhansk)

> "I think that football can unite our nation. We all want to live in a friendly country"
>
> An optimistic Ihor Surkis, president of Dynamo Kiev

infrastructure and better payments for the players. The party members voted and Lobanovskyi received everything he wanted to build a strong side."

Communists provided money, cars and flats for the Dynamo players, but they also made sure that they could control their assets by installing a direct phone line to Lobanovskyi's office and even to the stadium dressing room.

Even after Ukraine gained independence in 1991, Dynamo remained the dominant domestic power, greatly supported by the offices of two Ukrainian presidents: Leonid Kravchuk and his successor, Leonid Kuchma.

Across the country, local billionaire oligarchs – each with close links to politicians – invested heavily in football clubs, with their profits bringing big foreign names to the country. Such spending helped Shakhtar to emerge as a rival power to Dynamo – thanks to support from the country's now deposed president Victor Yanukovich – and they won the UEFA Cup in 2009.

But the newest generation of oligarchs has not been as fortunate as the likes of Ihor Surkis (Dynamo), Rinat Akhmetov (Shakhtar Donetsk), Ihor Kolomoyskyi (Dnipro) and Oleksandr Yaroslavsky (Metalist).

Damaged...the statue of legendary Dynamo coach Lobanovskyi

Serhiy Kurchenko, a 28-year-old billionaire who purchased Metalist from Yaroslavsky last year, escaped from the country after 11 criminal cases were opened against him. He had rocketed into the billionaire bracket in 2013 when his oil and gas companies floated. But as a close friend of the older son of dethroned president Yanukovich, he was accused of having received extremely favourable treatment during the acquisition of his business assets. Furthermore, it has been alleged that Kurchenko was nothing more than a front for the Yanukovich family's business interests.

Kurchenko withdrew his funding for Metalist when the first clashes between protesters and the riot police began at the end of November last year, and the unstable financial situation led to the resignation of club coach Myron Markevych. To pay bills, Metalist sold top scorer Marko Devich to the Russian club Rubin Kazan for €7million, but that proved to be only a temporary solution.

Assets frozen

With all of Kurchenko's assets frozen by the European Union, the future for Metalist looks bleak. Key players Jose Sosa and Jaja Coelho have left, while Argentinian striker Alejandro Gomez and Brazilian midfielder Diego Souza may not be far behind them. Sporting director Frank Arnesen has also gone.

Metalist are not the only club to have suffered from the mass exodus. Chornomorets, the revelation of the first half of the season, lost five foreigners: defenders Pablo Fontanello (Argentina) and Markus Berger (Austria), and midfielders Anderson Santana (Brazil), Franck Dja Djedje (France) and Sito Riera (Spain). Tavriya's Sweden defender Gustav Svensson decided to return home due to the political instability in Crimea.

The Ukraine Premier League re-started in March following the postponement of two matchdays on security grounds, but some of the first games were characterised by drama and farce. Tavriya and Sevastopol, the two clubs from Crimea, faced serious problems when dealing with the peninsula's new rulers, who tried to block their travel to league matches. Tavriya's problems were exacerbated by the detention in Austria of their billionaire owner, Dmytro Firtash.

It was Dynamo president Surkis who stepped in to help Tavriya get to Kiev – paying for a charter flight from Turkey, where the squad had been training.

"I think that football can unite our nation," said Surkis. "We all want to live in a friendly country. I'm sure football can provide the means to achieve that."

However, the feeling remains that his sentiments are not in tune with the current realities of Ukrainian football. WS

KLAAS-JAN DROPPERT
in The Hague

Oranje struck by Strootman blow

Midfielder's World Cup dream is ruined by cruciate-ligament injury

"Occasionally I have thought about the World Cup in the past few months. It's an issue in the Roma dressing room. With Daniele De Rossi, Gervinho and Miralem Pjanic I'm talking about it; mostly making jokes – like telling Pjanic that he can already book his holiday as Bosnia won't go very far in the tournament!"

Six days later, Kevin Strootman's laughter turned to tears when he tore cruciate ligaments playing for Roma against Napoli. As he left the pitch, he knew his World Cup dream was over.

Four years ago, when Holland reached the Final in South Africa, the 2014 World Cup was beyond his wildest imagination as he had just been relegated with Sparta Rotterdam and would play second-division football until Utrecht signed him at the end of the year.

But in just six months with Utrecht his career took off. He made his international debut against Austria in February 2011 before joining PSV in June. Two seasons later he joined Roma for €17million and, until his injury, he was a key factor in their rise to second place in Serie A.

"The good start of the team helped me a lot," says Strootman of his now-curtailed first campaign in Italian football. "It doesn't harm you playing against Milan, Napoli or Juventus.

"It's so different. For instance, preventing a goal with a tackle will get as much applause as scoring a goal. That's something I hadn't experienced before."

Holland coach Louis Van Gaal was quick to react on hearing the bad news about Strootman, saying: "This is a huge blow for the national team. Kevin had a big contribution to Holland's qualification."

The midfielder's absence leaves Van Gaal with a big problem since the 24-year-old – along with Robin Van Persie and Arjen Robben – was one of three players the coach had said were certain of their place in the squad for Brazil.

Strootman's stamina, power and distribution make him a solid all-rounder and similar replacements are thin on the ground. Hamburg's Rafael Van der Vaart may be a left-footer like Strootman, but he is a totally different type of player. Norwich City's Leroy Fer is probably the closest, while Milan's Nigel De Jong has similar power and defensive qualities.

Others who may come into contention include uncapped Tonny Vilhena of Feyenoord and AZ's Nemanja Gudelj, the inexperienced Davy Klaassen, and dark horses Marco Van Ginkel of Chelsea and Barcelona's Ibrahim Afellay, who have both only recently returned from lengthy injuries and are in need of games.

Van Gaal will, of course, leave his position after this summer's tournament and his successor, Guus Hiddink, who is currently working as an adviser to Phillip Cocu at PSV, is in the process of putting together his back-room staff.

Van Gaal's current assistant Danny Blind will stay on, before replacing Hiddink as national coach in 2016, while former international Ruud Van Nistelrooy has agreed to join up. Jaap Stam has turned down an approach and it remains to be seen what will happen to Van Gaal's other assistant Patrick Kluivert and the current goalkeeping coach, Frans Hoek.

> "We will wait for him and we hope to achieve Champions League qualification so that he can play in that tournament with us next season"
>
> Roma coach Rudi Garcia dedicated a 3-2 win over Udinese to Strootman

Vital role

While Strootman will almost certainly have a vital role to fulfil in Hiddink's Euro 2016 qualifying campaign, it is obvious that he would rather have played his part at this summer's tournament.

As he said on the eve of Holland's friendly in March, four days before injury ended his dream: "For me the World Cup is a motivation to do well. This is my first big tournament as I didn't play a single minute at Euro 2012.

"It's a nice feeling that I'm one of the players certain to go. However, a guarantee like that means nothing if you perform badly or get injured."

How he wishes his words hadn't had such a prophetical outcome. WS

All over...Strootman is in agony as he is helped from the pitch with his World Cup hopes in tatters

NICK BIDWELL
in Munich

Bayern stunned by Hoeness jail term

Club president punished for tax fraud as champions retain title

Having been sentenced to three-and-half years in prison for using a secret Swiss bank account to defraud the tax authorities on a massive scale, Uli Hoeness will have celebrated Bayern Munich's 24th championship in a very different manner to the previous 23.

A key attacking figure in West Germany's 1974 World Cup triumph and three times a European Cup winner with Bayern, Hoeness was initially charged with evading €3.5million in taxes and subsequently admitted in court to dodging a further €15m. But when it emerged during the trial that he actually owed €28.5m the game was well and truly up.

Tax dishonesty is a serious business in Germany and for all Hoeness' celebrity, sporting achievements and vast number of charitable works, the sentence was always likely to be custodial rather than suspended. An example had to be made – and the desired effect is already being felt, with more than 26,000 miscreants coming clean since the Bayern icon was caught in the net.

Describing the affair as "the mistake of my life", Hoeness decided not to request a judicial second opinion and duly tendered his resignation as both Bayern president and supervisory board chairman.

"I've asked my lawyers not to begin appeal proceedings," declared the 62-year-old in a press statement. "This ties in with my understanding of propriety, good conduct and personal responsibility.

"Bayern Munich is my life's work and always will be. Even though it will take a different form, I will remain close to this outstanding club and its people as long as I live. To my friends and club followers, I thank you for your support from the bottom of my heart."

> "I have to accept the consequences of my actions. I want to avoid any damage to my club"
> Uli Hoeness

The beginning of the end...Hoeness on his first day in court to face charges of tax evasion

Figure of antipathy

Too opinionated, too confrontational and too successful an administrator, Hoeness has long been a figure of antipathy for fans of other clubs. Yet even his most committed detractors would have to recognise the pivotal part he has played in Bayern's development into winning machine, economic growth factory and global brand.

In three decades as Bayern's general manager, from 1979 to 2009, Hoeness was nothing less than the nerve centre of the club. His dynamism, force of personality and financial shrewdness provided the framework for trophy after trophy – 28 major titles in all – and he helped transform an outfit with debts of DM7m into a Wall Street concern which last year recorded a turnover of €433m and held capital worth close to €287m.

During infamous public spats with a host of Bundesliga enemies – such as Cologne coach Christoph Daum and Werder Bremen chief executive Willi Lemke – Hoeness was the most ferocious of attack dogs, relentless and without remorse. And yet behind the uncompromising mask lay a character of warmth, compassion and solidarity.

After Bayern and West Germany goalscoring legend Gerd Muller fell victim to alcoholism in the early 1980s it was Hoeness who arranged a job for him at the club. Hoeness was also a constant source of support as international midfielder Sebastian Deisler battled depression a few years ago. And when the wife of a club physio was diagnosed with cancer he went looking in the USA for specialist help.

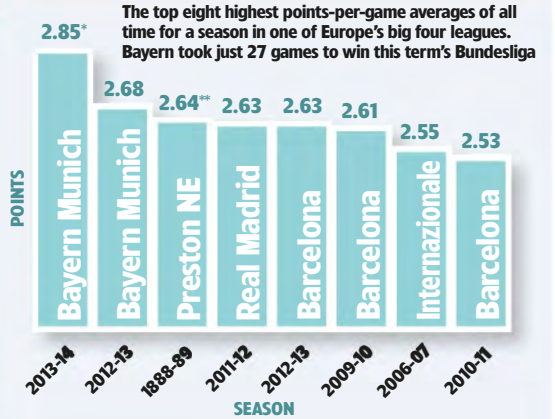
Whether dealing with a superstar or a bench-warmer with the amateurs, Hoeness' door was always open and – contrary to those who insists he was petty and parochial – he certainly had an eye for the big footballing picture. He was never slow to offer his club's services when financially struggling sides such as St Pauli, Aachen and others needed attractive opposition to raise funds.

The appointment of Adidas executive Herbert Hainer and ex-club finance director Karl Hopfner as business operation head honcho and club president respectively – both of whom have been in the boardroom for years – will safeguard continuity. And having broken a string of records on their way to this season's domestic success, Bayern under coach Pep Guardiola look set to dominate for many years to come.

But how they will miss the spirit and raw ambition of Hoeness. There will never be another. WS

BAYERN SET NEW POINTS-PER-GAME RECORD

The top eight highest points-per-game averages of all time for a season in one of Europe's big four leagues. Bayern took just 27 games to win this term's Bundesliga



(* after 27 games; ** if it had been three points for a win)

JAMES MONTAGUE
in Bucharest

Prison term ends Popescu ambitions

Former international found guilty of tax fraud and money laundering

Hidden evidence...Popescu shows documents relating to him from Romanian secret-police files

On a bitterly cold evening in Romania's capital Bucharest, the floodlights cast light and shadow over smoke and song around the Stadionul Ghencea. It is the "Eternal Derby", Steaua versus Dinamo, the army team against the team from internal security, and close to 30,000 people are filling the stands as flares burned.

Outside rival fans sing as they approach the stadium, separated by nervous police in body armour holding tear-gas canisters. They wouldn't be needed today. Yet, even as Steaua were preparing to take on a Dinamo team struggling in mid-table and looking towards their 25th league title, not everyone was solely concerned with what was about to unfold on the pitch.

"For us, when we play Dinamo, it is the biggest game of the year as we don't have many rivals any more," says Nicolae, a member of Steaua's ultras on his way to the game. "Many of the traditional clubs here in Romania have been destroyed because the FRF [Romanian Football Federation] went in dispute with some football owners and destroyed a lot of clubs like Rapid, Timisoara, Craiova..."

Nicolae, like all football fans in Romania, had one eye on the following week and the presidential election for the FRF. A new era in Romanian football was about to begin. By far the most likely to win the election was former Tottenham Hotspur and Barcelona captain Gheorghe Popescu. He remains one of Romania's best-ever players and was part of that great USA 94 team that could, and perhaps should, have made it to the Final.

"Popescu is from the new wave," says Nicolae. "He played football internationally, he's well known in Europe, the captain of Barca and he's not like Sandu."

Mircea Sandu is the current FRF president, but after 24 years in charge he is standing down. Sandu has never been charged with any crime or implicated in any impropriety, but the domestic game, much like Romania's political scene, has been riven with corruption and arrests of prominent figures in recent years. Match fixing used to be rife under Nicolae Ceausescu's communist regime, and titles, promotions, cups and relegations would be decided in smoke-filled rooms rather than on the pitch.

Popescu was seen by everyone I spoke to at Stadionul Ghenca as a safe, clean pair of hands. "Of course he is clean," remarked Ion Craciunescu, the referee in the 1995 Champions League Final who is now one of the country's leading TV pundits and also a close confidante of Popescu. "He will win [the vote] easily."

Except, there was to be no election – at least not for Popescu, who is now in jail, having been found guilty of a multimillion tax fraud as well as money laundering.

> "We don't have many rivals any more. Many of the traditional clubs in Romania have been destroyed"
>
> Steaua ultra Nicolae

Ubiquitous graffiti

Two ubiquitous pieces of graffiti can be seen daubed on walls and buildings throughout Bucharest. The first says "*Basarabia e România!*", a nationalistic rallying cry that claims modern day Moldova (what nationalists still refer to as "Basarabia") as part of the Romanian state. The other is "FRF = Mafia".

The Romanian federation is deeply unpopular with the fans and the media. The Popescu case was a long-running affair. The allegations concern the transfer of players over a six-year period, between 1999 and 2005, which had been kept off the books and then hidden from the tax authorities. Prosecutors estimated that a handful of clubs lost up to €10million, while almost €2m in taxes had gone unpaid. Popescu was found guilty alongside former Steaua coach Mihai Stoica, and Ioan and Victor Becali, Romania's first official agents after the fall of communism. Their brother, Gigi, is the owner of Steaua and is currently in jail himself for three years over a corrupt land deal that netted him nearly US$1m.

Instead of Popescu, 29-year-old Razvan Burleanu, a political scientist who never made it in the game, was elected. Sandu, it was agreed, would become honorary life president. Meanwhile, a campaign has been launched to free Popescu, who is still seen as a national hero. A petition has been gathering signatures to put pressure on the government to issue an amnesty.

"'Gica' Popescu, one of the symbols of Romanian football, should not be in prison, along with murderers and rapists," the petition reads. "For the joy he brought to millions of Romanians in his impressive career, he deserves the chance of amnesty. Let us prove we value our icons."

There is little chance of that happening, not least because Popescu, facing a three-year stretch with no appeal, doesn't want it. He began prison life in solitary confinement. "He is very down," Craciunescu said after the verdict. "He has been quarantined. But he accepts the charge. He wants to complete his sentence. He doesn't want an amnesty. It is very strong of him to say that."

Nicolae, the Steaua ultra, still believes Popescu was a good choice to succeed Sandu but adds: "Things are starting to move in Romania soccer."

And what of Steaua owner Becali? "He's kind of popular with half the Steaua fans," says Nicolae. "The stupid ones. A lot of us are happy he's in prison." WS

PADDY AGNEW
in Rome

Arena dreams

Roma announce bold plans for a new stadium

Building anything new in Rome is never an easy proposition. After all, the ruins of ancient Rome tend to represent an intimidating architectural reference point, while the lengthy bureaucratic procedures of the modern city discourage many.

And things are worse still if, like Serie A club Roma, you opt to build a new stadium in the city that houses arguably the most charismatic arena on the planet, namely the Roman Colosseum.

For all those reasons, then, it remains to be seen if and when the club will realise their hugely ambitious, €1billion project to build their own stadium in time for the 2016-17 season.

At a mid-March launch in the city hall, the media were treated to a sparkling presentation of the planned new stadium. Not only was club captain Francesco Totti there to talk enthusiastically about the project, it also fell to the mayor of Rome, Ignazio Marino, and Roma's American president James Pallotta to unveil the de rigueur plastic model of the Eternal City's latest wonder.

With a capacity of 52,500 the largely steel-and-glass structure is intended to be a "state of the art" arena which combines 356-days-per-year modern amenities and technology with an "intimate" pitch, allowing Roma fans to sit right on top of the action. Due to be built in the south west of Rome at the site of the former Tor Di Valle racecourse, the new stadium is just six kilometres from Fiumicino international airport.

Vision of the future...an artist's impression of the proposed new Roma stadium

Part of the plan envisages the construction of a "training and wellness" facility next to the new stadium, along with shops, restaurants, bars, a Nike Superstore and a Roma Hall of Fame. Importantly, the project does not involve any residential building – something that inevitably leads to endless polemics and controversy, if not litigation, in modern Rome.

> "We want to reproduce the glory and the power of Rome's Coliseum. We will build a sort of new Coliseum with a modern touch"
> Architect Dan Mais on Roma's plans for their new stadium

While all of this may sound fine and dandy, there are a number of unresolved issues linked to this ambitious project. For a start, Pallotta was unable to provide a detailed financial plan for the good reason that one has not yet been finalised.

And while the stadium itself is expected to cost €300m, the necessary work around it relating to transport requirements could cost another €700m. Given that the stadium will be situated just off the city ring road, it will be difficult to access for many city-based fans. Ironically, it will be much easier for those fans who fly in via Fiumicino.

All of which means new roads, perhaps a new bridge over the nearby Tiber and almost certainly an extension of the railway line as far as Tor Di Valle will all be required to ensure that 50,000 fans can easily get in and out of the new venue.

Roma claim that they will be footing the bill for all of this while Marino warned that until such time as all the various infrastructural works required by city hall are completed, the stadium will not be allowed to open.

Rome has, of course, been here before. In September 2009 the club's president at the time, Rosella Sensi, presented her plans for a new stadium which looked suspiciously similar to Munich's Allianz Arena and was also due to be situated in south-west Rome. In 2007, Lazio president Claudio Lotito threatened to build a new stadium at Valmontone, some 25 miles south of the capital. In more recent times, Lotito has moved his proposed site much closer to the city but has yet to finalise any definitive project.

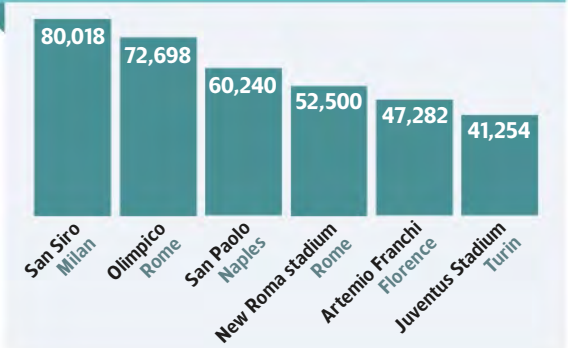
Watershed moment

There is no guarantee that Roma will succeed now where they – and Lazio – have failed before but they, and other clubs who follow, may be helped by legislation introduced by the recent Enrico Letta-led government which excludes residential development being linked to the building of a new ground, thus reducing the bureaucracy involved.

The Roma development may prove to be a watershed moment for Italian football. Following the successful example of the new Juventus Stadium in Turin, most critics would agree that new club-owned stadia to replace decrepit, fan-unfriendly, local authority-run grounds are vital for the Italian future.

It could be that the United States' "can-do" drive and energy will pave the way for Italian football. Pallotta argues that the new stadium is a step down the road to making his club one of the "top three in the world". That is a tall order, but what seems certain is that a new Roma stadium will breathe badly needed new funds and energy into Serie A. **WS**

CAPACITIES: THE BIGGEST GROUNDS IN SERIE A



SID LOWE
in Madrid

All to play for

Magical *clasico* blows title race wide open

No one was happier with the result of the latest Real Madrid-Barcelona *clasico* than the men who did not manage to see it.

Atletico Madrid's players boarded the 21.05 high-speed train in Seville, where they had beaten Real Betis 2-0, with goals from Gabi and Diego Costa, and took up their seats in carriage 11. Out came the laptops, mobiles and iPads. Real and Barca had just kicked off, but by the time Atletico's players had settled into their seats, Andres Iniesta had already put Barcelona in front.

It turned out to be a fantastic *clasico*, one of the most exciting, most exhilarating there has been. Just watching it was exhausting, so for those in carriage 11 it would have been exasperating – albeit with a happy ending. As the train shot through the dark, travelling north at over 175mph, the reception would not hold. Watching was virtually impossible. News instead came through sporadically, with messages swinging back and forth just like the game did. And what a game it was.

Having trailed 1-0, Real turned it round with a couple of goals from Karim Benzema. Barcelona then pulled level with Lionel Messi making it 2-2 by half-time, but Real regained the lead when Cristiano Ronaldo scored from a penalty shortly after the interval. Two more spot-kicks followed, this time for Barca. Sergio Ramos received yet another red card in the first incident as Messi completed his hat-trick by unerringly converting both to leave the visitors 4-3 winners.

Greased lightning...Messi is too quick for Real Madrid's defence as he scores the first of his hat-trick

It was a game that had it all: seven goals, three penalties and one red card. It was fast, frenetic and at times graced by supreme skill – and if the defending was questionable that only added to the entertainment.

The front page of *AS* called it "a footballing storm", while *Marca* described it as "beautiful, full of emotion". Carlo Ancelotti's side had lost – their record against Barcelona and Atletico reads one point from 12 – but he too expressed his satisfaction. Madrid had played well, he said. Either side could have won it.

Focus on controversy

Inevitably, the fallout focused on controversy and the referee Undiano Mallenco. After Messi's first spot-kick, there was a set-to between Pepe and Cesc Fabregas, and Sergio Busquets appeared momentarily to tread on Pepe's face as he lay on the floor. And of the

MESSI BY NUMBERS: BARCELONA'S SUPERSTAR SETS MORE RECORDS

21
The Argentinian has now scored more goals in the *clasico* than any other player

371
A hat-trick in the 7-0 thrashing of Osasuna the week before made him Barcelona's record scorer in all matches, including friendlies

235
He also became La Liga's second-highest scorer of all-time, behind Telmo Zarra's 251 for Athletic Bilbao

£335,000
Barcelona's proposed new weekly wage for the 26-year-old will make him the world's best-paid player

> "It obviously annoys people for Madrid to win. They're envious"
> Cristiano Ronaldo

three penalties, only the challenge on Iniesta from Xabi Alonso and Dani Carvajal is entirely clear-cut. Ronaldo's was given for a foul outside the area, while the challenge on Neymar remains unclear even after countless replays, even though Ramos was sent off for it.

Ramos suggested that the decision had been premeditated, saying: "If they wanted to tighten up the title, they've got what they wanted."

Cristiano Ronaldo was also calling foul and talking of a conspiracy when he said: "It obviously annoys people for Madrid to win. They're envious. It doesn't interest anyone and the referees know that."

Maybe frustration played a part. After all, Ronaldo did not dominate as he would have liked and he was eclipsed by Messi – although he still scored his 26th league goal of the season.

Flashpoint... Busquets appears to stamp on Pepe's face

Gareth Bale was not able to impose himself either, although one superb run led to a chance for Benzema from which he drew a sharp save from Víctor Valdes. And while the doubts about Neymar were not overcome, he too had been significant. The Brazilian was involved in the move that led to 2-2 and he was brought down for the penalty from which Messi made it 3-3.

Neymar and Dani Alves had been given an extremely hard time on the Barcelona right, particularly in the first half. Alves did, though, thump one ball off the post from 20 yards.

Angel Di Maria, Iniesta, Benzema and Messi were all superb. Benzema headed Real's first goal then put Madrid 2-1 up with a lovely second, controlling the ball on a thigh and volleying past Valdes. Di Maria had made both. He had already produced a lovely run and assist for Benzema to shoot over just before and he then clipped another ball to the far post where Benzema brought it down, cut inside and shot, only for Gerard Pique to clear off the line.

The Argentinian was tearing into Barcelona. After the equaliser he had collapsed, dizzy and struggling to breathe, totally spent. After a week with flu he seemed to be in trouble; he was pallid and gulping for air, so the referee called for a stretcher. But Di Maria got to his feet and immediately made Real's second.

At the other end, Iniesta was at his impish best, while Messi completed his second *clasico* hat-trick to overtake Alfredo Di Stefano as the fixture's top scorer. The week before he had overtaken Paulino Alcantara as the all-time top scorer in Barcelona's history.

Even more impressive was Messi's passing. He had played in Iniesta for the first and found Neymar for the second, only for the Brazilian to be dispossessed before Messi pounced with lightning speed to finish off beyond three lunging defenders. Then there was the extraordinary pass to Neymar, threaded 30 yards on the perfect angle for his team-mate's run, which drew a penalty and Ramos' sending off.

"Talking about Messi is redundant," said Barcelona coach Gerardo Martino. "Because it's eulogy after eulogy, record after record. I think he has got another one today, hasn't he?" There were nods in the press room and Martino joked: "I just hope he gives me the ball!"

Championship *clasico*

It hadn't just been an impressive game; it had been an important one too. This was the 43rd *clasico* since the turn of the century and it had been billed as a decisive game. One headline on the morning of the game summed it up as a "championship *clasico*".

Martino admitted that a defeat would have meant Barcelona's title chances were "completely over". Victory meant they were "completely in it again". A Madrid victory would have taken them seven points clear of their rivals; instead Barcelona pulled to within a single point. No wonder they celebrated in Catalonia.

But if it was a decisive game for Barca, it was even more important for the passengers on the 21.05 out of Sevilla Santa Justa. When the final whistle went at the Santiago Bernabeu, Atletico's train was about 15 minutes away from its final destination of Madrid Atocha.

A roar went round carriage 11, heard right down the train. There were songs and clapping. One of the best *clasicos* in recent memory benefited the team that aspires to break up the Barcelona-Real monopoly on the title for the first time in a decade. After the *clasico*, a solitary point separated the three contenders. And with nine games to go Atletico had moved back to the top of the table. **WS**

MARK GLEESON

Holders crash out of Champions League

Egypt's Al Ahly shocked by Libyan namesakes in last knockout round

The predictable demise of CAF Champions League holders Al Ahly came in a much more dramatic manner than anticipated. The long-standing turmoil in Egypt has eventually caught up with the continent's top club side and the team from Cairo tumbled out of this year's competition in the last knockout round, missing out on the group phase.

That exit came in the same week as government-imposed changes at Ahly saw a new management imposed, but the defeat is the process of two years of civil unrest in the country which has impacted heavily on a club whose own "ultras" have been at the forefront of the revolution.

Ahly have achieved miracles over the last 24 months with two successive Champions League titles – despite being banned from their home stadium, denied the support of their fans and losing money heavily as football in Egypt has either been put on hold or forced to play behind closed doors.

As a result, Ahly lost their dominant role in the transfer market and they are no longer able to snare the best Egyptian talent at a time when two of their most influential players – Mohamed Aboutrika and Mohamed Barakat – have retired.

But defeat, both home and away, in the second round by Libya's Al Ahly from Benghazi was still a major shock.

Libyan football has been in even worse circumstances after the conflict to remove Muammar Gaddafi from power and Al Ahly Benghazi have been forced to move their matches in this year's Champions League from their home to neighbouring Tunisia such is the instability in the lawless east of the country.

Scraping through 1-0 against the holders in the first leg at a sparsely filled stadium in Tunis did not foretell what was to come as the Egyptians – who had never before been beaten by Libyan opposition – were expected to bounce back with some ease in the return.

Uncertainty over the second leg venue preceded the fixture. The Egyptian authorities still don't like Ahly supporters congregating together and so wanted the match moved to Alexandria. However, it was eventually played in the capital at the Air Defence Stadium, with just a handful of spectators let in.

It was all looking to be on track as the hosts took the lead through centre-half Mohamed Nagieb to level the aggregate score, but then national-team midfielder Hossam Ashour conceded a penalty that skipper Abderrahmane Fetori converted to put the Libyans back ahead.

That was followed early in the second half by a stunning left-footed drive from outside the penalty area by Farag Abdelhafiz and then some sublime skill from Moataz Al Mehdi, who shifted the ball from right to left to see off an attempted tackle before curling the ball into the net.

At 3-1 up, the Libyans would have had to concede four goals in order to lose the tie, but the hosts – who were down to 10 men for the last half hour after defender Ahmed Fathy was sent off – managed just one through Mahmoud Hassan and so lost at home for only the sixth time in African club competition.

The game is up...downcast Al Ahly coach Youssef saw his team outplayed in the last knockout stage

> "Even Mourinho and Guardiola would fail at Ahly if they were in this current situation"
> Mohamed Youssef, coach of Egypt's Al Ahly

Power base

Benghazi's Al Ahly will now compete in the league phase for the first time, joined by another five clubs from Arabic-speaking countries as the power base of club football continues to reside firmly in the north of the continent.

Tunisia has Esperance, past winners, and CS Sfaxien, along with Entente Setif of Algeria, Sudan's Al Hilal and Egypt's Zamalek, now coached by former Tottenham Hotspur striker Mido, who won 5-0 in their decisive last knockout-round tie against Nkana of Zambia.

Sub-Saharan Africa is represented only by two clubs from the Democratic Republic of Congo: TP Mazembe, the 2009 and 2010 winners, and AS Vita, African champions some four decades ago but who will be making their debut in the league competition.

AS Vita held out in dramatic fashion to edge out Kaizer Chiefs of South Africa 3-2 on aggregate while Mazembe were unconvincing in winning on the away goals rule over Sewe Sport of Ivory Coast. WS

CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2014

The draw for the group phase will take place on April 29. The following eight teams will be divided into two groups of four:

Al Ahly Benghazi (Lby)	Esperance (Tun)
Al Hilal (Sud)	ES Setif (Alg)
AS Vita (DRC)	TP Mazembe (DRC)
CS Sfaxien (Tun)	Zamalek (Egy)

STEVE MENARY

It's Russia or bust for new boss Gomez

Coach told that he must target 2018 World Cup

Missing out...Panama midfielder Godoy cannot bear it as his side lose out to the USA for a place in Brazil

The 2018 World Cup may be four years away but for Panama's new coach Hernan Dario Gomez the road to Russia starts on May 31, when the Colombian sends out his first national selection for a friendly with Serbia.

Four days later, Panama take on Brazil ahead of September's Centroamericana Cup in the USA – but Gomez knows that there is only one objective.

"Participation in the 2018 World Cup is the only target we have set," says Panamanian Football Federation (FPF) vice-president Mateo Fabrega.

A former national boss of Colombia, Gomez took Ecuador to the 2002 World Cup finals and the FPF want him to emulate that feat.

Fabrega adds: "It would be great to win the Centroamericana Cup and Gold Cup on the way, but those are not the goals. His contract is valid through the Russia 2018 World Cup as long as we have a realistic chance of qualifying.

"It would be terminated if we are eliminated from the competition."

That was the fate of Gomez's predecessor, Julio Dely Valdes, who left after Panama's last international: a heartbreaking 3-2 home defeat by the USA in their last qualifying game for the World Cup finals in October.

Gomez will be charged with picking up the pieces from a campaign that saw "*Los Canaleros*" just miss out on an intercontinental play-off game against Jordan as they conceded two injury-time goals to the US and crashed out.

Day of mourning

That defeat by the United States will be forever etched in the nation's collective memory. "It's like the day that Kennedy was shot; it's marked as a day of mourning," says former Panama coach Gary Stempel.

Born in Panama City but raised in London, former Millwall youth coach Stempel is a key figure in the recent improvement in Panamanian football. In 2003, he took the under-20 team to the country's first world finals: the 2003 World Youth Championship in the United Arab Emirates.

Panama lost all three games, but Stempel took charge of the senior team in 2008 and won the country's only trophy to date, the 2009 Centroamericana Cup, but left soon after. He was offered the job again this year on an interim basis, but declined, staying as coach of La Chorrera-based club side San Francisco.

"Gary has been fundamental to the development of our sport," says Fabrega. "Twenty years ago soccer was the fourth sport in Panama, behind baseball, basketball and boxing.

"We can confidently say now we are Panama's no1 sport, but mostly because of our national team. We need to reinforce the Liga Panamena de Futbol (LPF) to have the basis for sustainability."

Players in the LPF earn between US$400 and US$600 a month. A decade ago wages were no more than US$200 a month, but players can earn as much as US$8,000 a month playing in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala.

Of the starting line-up in that game against the USA in October, only Carlos Rodriguez and Marcos Sanchez were playing in Panama and they had already experienced playing overseas, at MLS sides Dallas and DC United respectively.

> "It's like the day that Kennedy was shot; it's marked as a day of mourning"
>
> Former Panama coach Gary Stempel on October's loss to the USA

Even players on the periphery of the team play overseas. Yairo Yau was with Sydney in Australia until recently returning home to join Sporting San Miguelito. "Football is not as professional in Panama as it is elsewhere, like in Australia," says Yau.

Anibal Godoy, who plays in Hungary for Honved, agrees, stating: "Until the level of the league of Panama improves significantly it helps that the players play in foreign, higher quality leagues so they can bring the international experience to our national-team matches."

It's that experience that Gomez will call on to develop a squad capable of wiping out last year's disappointment and qualifying for Russia. WS

All to do...Panama's new coach Gomez

TIM VICKERY
in Rio de Janeiro

Second fiddle to World Cup jamboree

Championship overshadowed by FIFA's showpiece event

Last year's championship in Brazil still threatens to derail the 2014 version, with the legal ramifications of Portuguesa's relegation still not exhausted after they were docked four points for fielding an ineligible player in the last round of games – a penalty which saved 2012 champions Fluminense from the drop.

One possible outcome is that Portuguesa could take their case to the conventional justice system on the eve of the new season, leaving the Brazilian FA with insufficient time to take out a restraining order should the court find in favour of the club from Sao Paulo.

Whatever happens there, the 2014 World Cup will certainly have an effect on the domestic game. In the short term, there is the disruption to the absurdly cluttered local calendar as the championship shuts down for six weeks to make way for the FIFA jamboree. The competition is already starting a month earlier than usual in an attempt to fit everything in, but it will still be a squeeze to accommodate all 38 rounds.

A long-term hope is that the World Cup will help further decentralise the Brazilian game. An astonishing 16 of the 20 top-flight clubs are drawn from just two regions – the south east and the south – and from only six of the 27 states that make up this giant country. These two regions supply five of the 12 World Cup host cities, so three of the remaining seven could prove to be stony ground for the development of the game, with doubts about the ability of Brasilia, Manaus and Cuiaba to come up with a strong local football culture.

More is expected of the four host cities (Fortaleza, Natal, Recife, Salvador) in the north east, an area where the clubs have substantial followings but rarely punch near their weight on the national stage. The region staged half of the Confederations Cup, will play host to a third of the World Cup and supplies three first-division teams this year.

Goal threat...Sao Paulo's Fabiano will take some stopping

Stronger states

Sao Paulo is traditionally one of Brazil's strongest states, but last year was something of an exception with not one of its teams managing to qualify for the Libertadores Cup. It would, however, be a major surprise if such a thing was to happen again this term.

Sao Paulo FC look very much like title contenders. They may have been dogged of late by internal problems, but Muricy Ramalho, who led the side to three consecutive titles in the previous decade (2006-2008), is back in charge of a squad with ominous attacking strength in depth. With Luis Fabiano, Alexandre Pato and Dorlan Pabon, goals should not be a problem.

The worry for Corinthians has been the break-up of a side that won the world title in 2012 and the loss of coach Tite. However, former national boss Mano Menezes has returned and the team's early elimination from the state championship could be a blessing in disguise as it gives him time to construct a new team.

Back in the top flight after a one-year absence, there is plenty of optimism surrounding Palmeiras, who are coached by Gilson Kleina. A "magic quartet" of Jorge Valdivia, Bruno Cesar, Leandro and Alan Kardec looks intriguing, while Santos, under Oswaldo de Oliveira, have a group of promising youngsters, plus the acquisition of centre-forward Leandro Damiao to lead the line.

In contrast, the teams from Rio de Janeiro do not look so convincing.

Flamengo, under Jayme De Almeida, have lost midfielder Elias, while Eduardo Hungaro's Botafogo lament the absence of Clarence Seedorf, who retired to coach Milan. Fluminense, who replaced Renato Gaucho with Cristovao Borges in April, will have to cope with taunts over the controversial way they were saved from relegation. Centre-forward Fred may be preoccupied with the World Cup, but the signing of the rotund yet talented Walter will ease the strain.

The city of Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, had plenty to celebrate last year, with Cruzeiro strolling to the domestic title and Atletico Mineiro winning the Libertadores. Atletico came down to earth in the Club World Cup and are rebuilding under Paulo Autori, while Marcelo Oliveira's Cruzeiro suffered some early losses in the Libertadores.

Hope...Gremio may fancy their chances this year

Title contenders

Gremio, from Porto Alegre in Rio Grande do Sul state, will consider themselves title contenders. Under Enderson Moreira, who did so well with Goias last year, they have caught the eye with a bold 4-3-3 and a productive youth policy, both symbolised by young support striker Luan (Talent Scout, page 92). Their local rivals, Internacional, with Abel Braga back in charge, will hope to put a disappointing 2013 behind them, especially as they will soon move back to their home stadium, which has been closed for World Cup work.

The league's nine other sides will almost certainly be more than happy

just to finish the season in mid table.

Atletico Paranaense, from Curitiba in the state of Parana, will be boosted by the return to their stadium after World Cup work. Even so, they will be hard pushed to repeat their remarkable campaign of last year, when they finished third. City rivals Coritiba battled against relegation and can expect another hard year. And life will not be easy for the three teams from the neighbouring southern state of Santa Catarina. Criciuma just managed to stay up last season and they are now joined by two promoted teams: Figueirense and Chapecoense. The latter, back in the top flight for the first time since the bloated days of the late 70s, were second division runners-up but have been in poor form this year in the local state championship.

Outside the south and south east, only four teams remain. Goias, from the centre of the country, came a surprise sixth last year but will suffer from the loss of coach Moreira and star striker Walter. Claudinei Oliveira, who showed promise last year in charge of Santos, has a difficult task.

And then there are the three representatives of the north east. Sport from Recife have been a yo-yo club in recent times and are back in the first division after a year's absence. Completing the field are the pair from Salvador: Bahia, who battled to the last to save themselves last term, while Vitoria finished fifth.

If there is to be a surprise, maybe Vitoria will have the continuity and the firepower to launch a challenge to the giants in the south. **WS**

KEY DATES

Season starts
April 19, 2014

Mid-season break
June 2 to July 14, 2014

Season ends
December 6, 2014

CAMPEONATO BRASILEIRO SERIE A 2014

1	Atletico Mineiro
	Cruzeiro
2	Atletico Paranaense
	Coritiba
3	Bahia
	Vitoria
4	Botafogo
	Flamengo
	Fluminense
5	Chapecoense
6	Corinthians
	Palmeiras
	Sao Paulo
7	Criciuma
8	Figueirense
9	Goias
10	Gremio
	Internacional
11	Santos
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PLAYER Biography

Sergio Aguero

Memories of where it all started continue to drive the Argentinian striker on to greater success. By Joel Richards

In the euphoria of Manchester City's first English league championship success in 44 years, Sergio "Kun" Aguero draped a red flag over his shoulders. Amid the celebrations after his dramatic 93rd-minute goal against Queens Park Rangers that had won the Premier League, he dedicated the 2012 title to the club's supporters, but also to the Independiente fans who were watching back home in Argentina on TV. "That is where I was born," he said. "And that is where I'll end my career."

For most players who leave their country while still in their teens to enjoy successful and lucrative careers in Europe, there is a long-held desire to end their playing days at the club that offered them a first chance. In recent years, Juan Sebastian Veron fulfilled a promise to return to Estudiantes – and not only was he able to financially help the club, he also led them to a Libertadores Cup win. Maxi Rodriguez, Gabriel Heinze and Ignacio Scocco returned to Newell's Old Boys to lend a hand and they lifted the league title in the process.

Aguero is already in a situation to help Independiente financially, and in fact he offered to do exactly that when they were relegated last year and needed funds to sign new players. Yet before he returns to finish his career at a stadium that his sale helped to build, his career to date suggests that there are more crowning moments still to come.

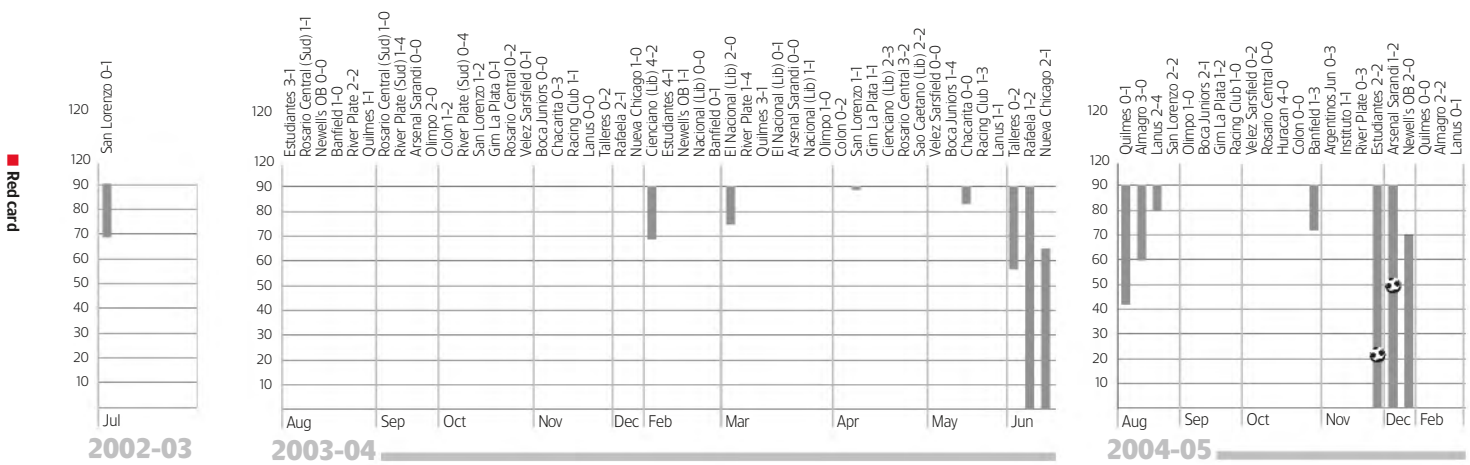
"He joined Independiente at the age of nine," said Ricardo Bochini shortly after Aguero signed for City in 2011. "We immediately saw that he was a special player. He had great confidence on the ball and was an excellent finisher."

Bochini is one of the last of a rare breed. Spending his entire career at a ▸

TIMELINE: EVERY MATCH, EVERY MINUTE, EVERY GOAL

- Independiente
- Atletico Madrid
- Manchester City
- Argentina

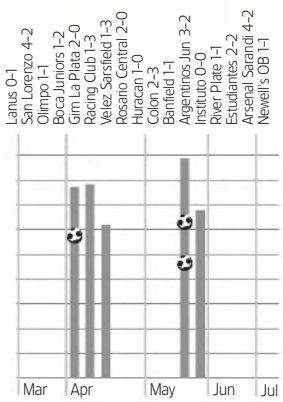
WC World Cup qualifier
WCF World Cup finals
CA Copa America
Lib Libertadores Cup
Sud Sudamericana Cup
CL UEFA Champions League
UC UEFA Cup/Europa League
USC UEFA Super Cup
Int Intertoto Cup
SC Spanish Cup
EC English FA Cup
ELC English League Cup
ECS English Community Shield

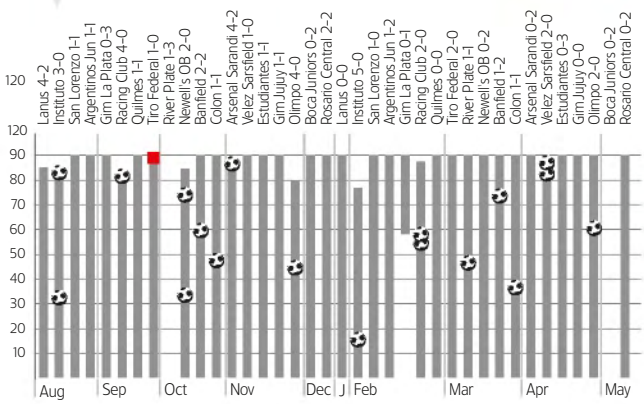


Delight...Aguero celebrates a goal against Costa Rica at the 2011 Copa America

Aug 14, 2005 – scores two goals at home to Instituto in the second game of the season.

Sep 3, 2006 – makes his international debut in a friendly against Brazil at the Emirates Stadium, London.





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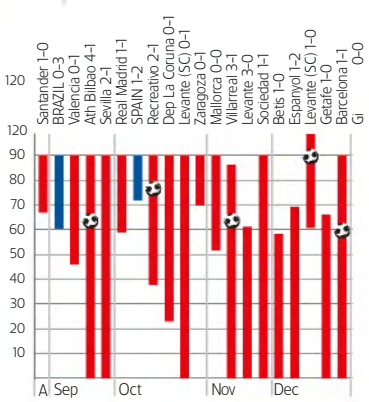


2006-07

Champion...hoisting the Premier League trophy after his last-gasp goal won the title for Manchester City

FACT FILE

Sergio Leonel Aguero Del Castillo

Nationality Argentinian

Age 25 (02.06.88)

Place of birth Buenos Aires, Argentina

Height 5ft 8in (1.73m)

Position Forward

Teams

Independiente
(2003-06) 56 games/23 goals

Atletico Madrid
(2006-11) 234 games/101 goals

Manchester City
(2011-present) 116 games/73 goals*

Argentina
(2006-present) 50 games/21 goals*

Honours

Atletico Madrid
Europa League 2010; UEFA Super Cup 2010

Manchester City
Premier League 2012; League Cup 2014; Community Shield 2012

Argentina
Olympics 2008; Under-20 World Cup 2005, 2007

(up to and inc 29.02.14)*

single club, Bochini directed play and led Independiente to win 13 trophies including four league championships, four Libertadores Cups and two Intercontinental trophies. It is the era that catapulted the Buenos Aries club to be called "the King of Cups".

"After the team that I played in, along with [Daniel] Bertoni up front, Aguero is probably the player that Independiente fans have most identified with in recent years," says Bochini. "They have a very strong relationship with him, even though he left the club to move to Spain at such a young age."

Bochini was coaching youth teams at Independiente when Aguero arrived. And when Aguero was installed as a first-team regular, it was Bochini who symbolically presented the striker with the no10 shirt.

Tough upbringing

Aguero's upbringing is similar to many South American stars. His parents moved from the north of the country to the outskirts of Buenos Aires as teenagers in search of work. They lived in one of the slums, Los Eucaliptos, which are known as "*villa miserias*". Their house had no running water. When their first son was born, Adriana Aguero had to take two buses and a train to reach the hospital in time. And because of their young age, Leonel Del Castillo had to register Sergio with his mother's surname.

The family's economic situation was so precarious that Aguero joined neither Lanus nor Quilmes because of the rule that said youth-team players must become club members. The £9 monthly membership fee at the time was simply too much for the family to afford.

Aguero's family signed an agreement with the same lawyer who had helped a previous Independiente youth-team

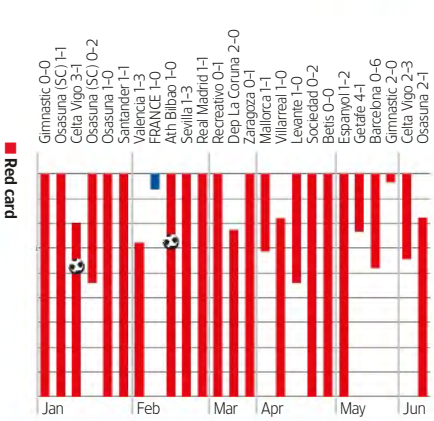
> The tattoo on Aguero's right arm is written in "Elvish", a fictional language taken from JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* books, and is a translation of "Kun Aguero"

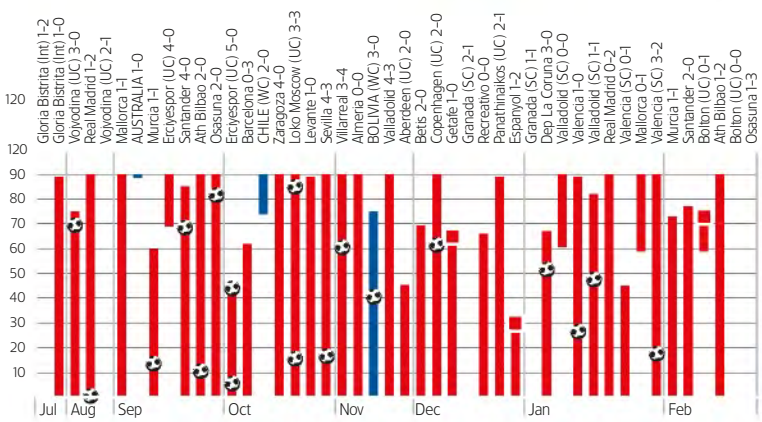
Early days...playing for one of Independiente's age-group teams

■ Independiente
■ Atletico Madrid
■ Manchester City
■ Argentina

Nov 17, 2007 – scores his first international goal as Argentina beat Bolivia in a World Cup qualifier in Buenos Aires.

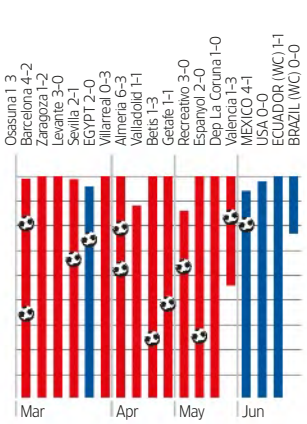
Feb 14, 2008 – sent off against Bolton Wanderers in the UEFA Cup, having only been on the field for 14 minutes.

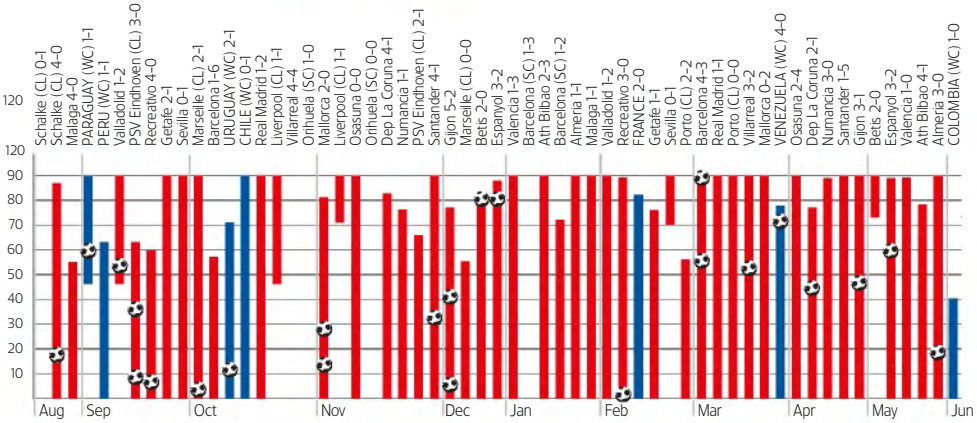




Filling out...Aguero is challenged by Diego Menghi of Racing in an Argentinian top-tier game

Mar 1, 2009 – scores an 89th-minute winner as Atletico Madrid come from 3-2 down to beat Barcelona 4-3 at the Vicente Calderon.





player, Diego Forlan. The allowance enabled the family to move from the villa, where Aguero had been already nicknamed "Kun" after the Japanese cartoon series that the youngster obsessed over as a child.

"To be honest, I think [Oscar] Ruggeri wanted to be the one that gave him his debut," said Bochini, "because after that Sergio didn't play for some time."

Under coach Ruggeri – who had been Argentina's World Cup-winning centre-back in 1986, Aguero broke Diego Maradona's record as the youngest debutant in the domestic top flight, facing San Lorenzo aged 15 years, one month and three days. He had to wait seven months to feature for the first team again, this time under Jose Pastoriza, before making his first start for the side just after his 16th birthday. When later asked in Spain about the pressure of making his debut at such a young age, Aguero replied: "Pressure is growing up in a *villa*."

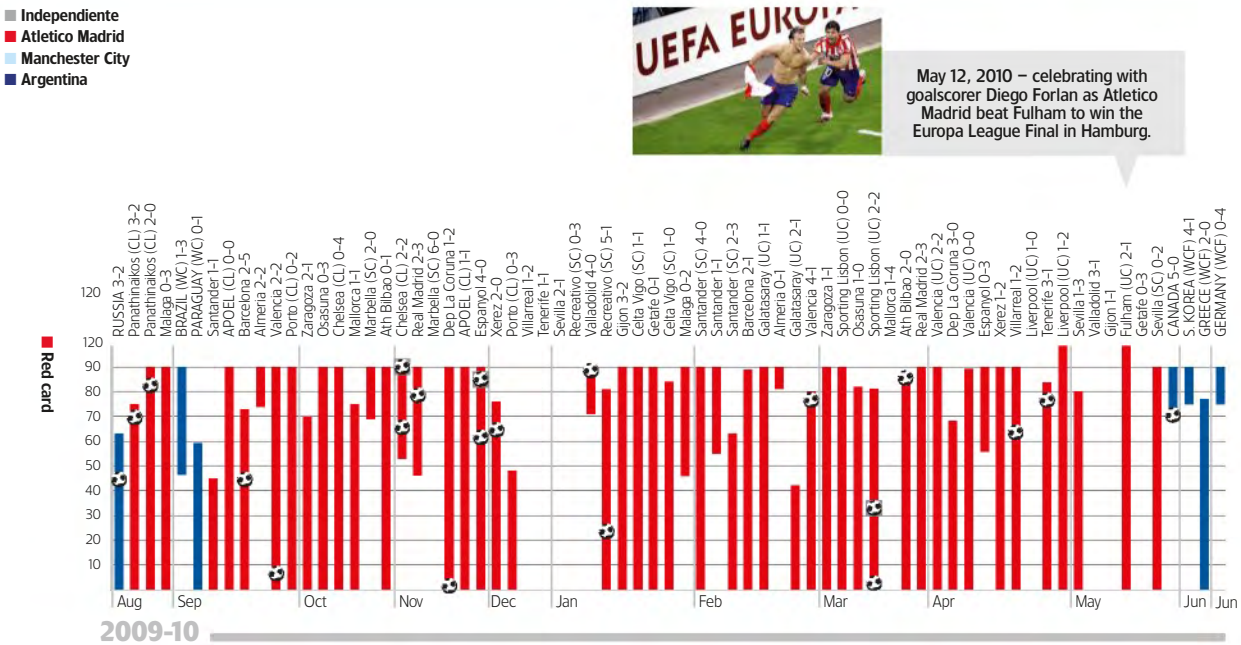
In the two years after his debut, Aguero already displayed a vast repertoire of power, speed, precision in finishing, great vision and audacity.

"What we are seeing is one of the great arrivals in Argentinian football. He has huge potential," said the World Cup-winning coach Cesar Luis Menotti, by this stage Aguero's fifth coach in the Independiente first team. "He reminds me of Romario because of how he moves in the penalty area."

Clubs soon queued up to show their interest. In England, Manchester United, Chelsea and Liverpool were all following the player – although Rafael Benitez perhaps reflected the feeling that the price tag for such a young player was a

Spanish days...playing for Atletico Madrid against Sporting Gijon in La Liga

May 12, 2010 – celebrating with goalscorer Diego Forlan as Atletico Madrid beat Fulham to win the Europa League Final in Hamburg.



risk. Independiente were driving for a high price.

Interest from Germany fizzled out when Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said Bayern Munich wouldn't buy the 17-year old, telling *Bild*: "He is valued at €20million. A percentage had to go directly to the president. Bayern don't take part in those kind of deals."

New stadium

Eventually it was Atletico Madrid who met the €23m price tag for the player. For Independiente, the income meant they could begin work on the new stadium, the Libertadores de America.

With just over 50 games for the first team, and 23 goals, Aguero's move to Europe followed the marked pattern of transfers from Argentina, where clubs are forced to sell their teenage talent, even though the bond is already formed.

"I arrived at Independiente when I was nine and left when I was 18," Aguero wrote in his autobiography. "I had spent half my life at that club."

> "The existence of my son [Benjamin] gives me strength. He gives me purpose. I think of him every time I score"
>
> Aguero

At Atletico he struggled in the first season. The club's backroom staff were worried that he ate too much meat "and hardly drank any water". Aguero managed just six league goals. Yet the following season, in the wake of Fernando Torres' departure for Liverpool, he hit 27 goals in all competitions. He forged a strong relationship with Forlan, who like Aguero had started his career at Independiente. In five seasons at the Vicente Calderon, Aguero won two trophies and scored 101 goals. And aged just 23, any doubts that he would take time to adapt to the English league were dispelled with two goals on his debut against Swansea City.

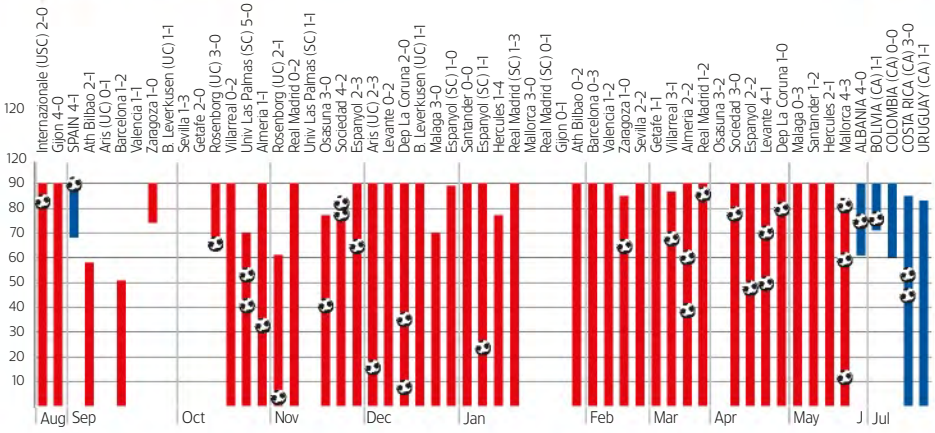
His international career had picked up as soon as he arrived in Spain. From the under-15s upwards, Aguero had been in the national team set-up. He was still eligible to play for the under-17s when he was fast-tracked to an under-20s team led by Lionel Messi. In 2005, the Barcelona striker guided Argentina to success in the Under-20 World Cup. Aguero made four substitute appearances, but in 2007 he took over in Messi's absence and it was he who steered Argentina to another title with six goals in seven games, winning the tournament's Golden Boot in the process.

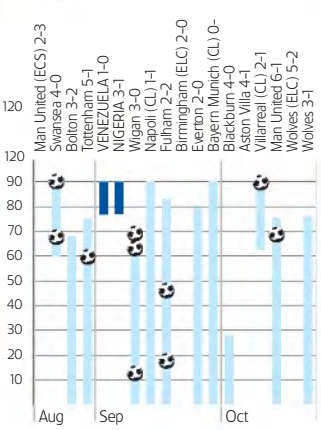
Jose Pekerman already had the young Messi for the 2006 World Cup and opted for Julio Cruz along with Hernan Crespo, Rodrigo Palacio, Carlos Tevez and Javier Saviola. It was under Alfio Basile that the debate over the "three shorties" – Messi, Aguero and Tevez – playing together began. Basile, Diego Maradona and Sergio Batista all tried; and the

Young guns...hugging Messi after the latter scores in the World Youth Championship in Holland in 2005

Aug 27, 2010 – with his son, Benjamin, and the UEFA Super Cup after his goal helped Atletico Madrid beat Internazionale in Monaco.

Aug 15, 2011 – scores twice on his Manchester City debut after coming on as a substitute at home to Swansea City.





conundrum was only solved after the 2011 Copa America when Alejandro Sabella simply no longer called up Tevez.

Maradona had long championed Tevez's career and the player who shares a similar background to Aguero was ahead in the pecking order. But Maradona's gung-ho approach backfired in South Africa, with a 4-0 hammering by Germany in the quarter-finals when Aguero was only a last-ditch substitute.

The man who by this stage was Aguero's father-in-law stepped down and was replaced by Batista, who had enjoyed success at the Beijing Olympic Games with the group of players. Aguero's three goals in the group stage of the 2011 Copa America were the only redeeming facts from a miserable tournament in which neither he nor Messi shone and Uruguay's Luis Suarez took the accolades.

Though Aguero and Tevez overlapped at club level, it is the relationship with Messi that holds most hope back home.

Under Sabella, Argentina are built around, and for, Messi. But Aguero's role is vital and he is arguably the second name on the teamsheet. Off the pitch the two are close friends. They met on duty for Argentina's youth teams, but Messi recalls seeing Aguero make his debut for Independiente while on leave from Barcelona, and wondering whether he, too, would soon debut for his club.

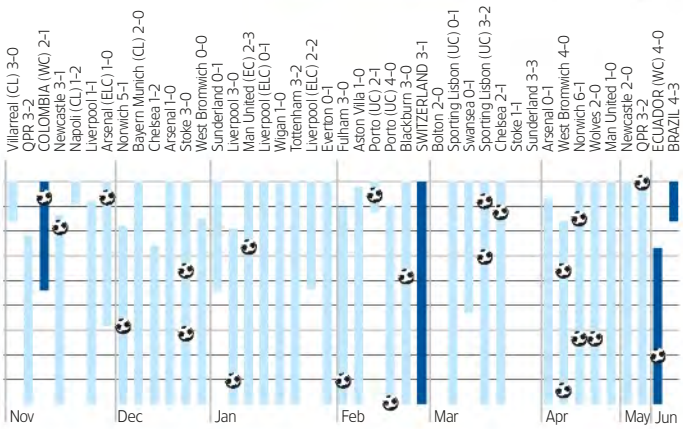
Now both will wonder whether together they can produce another crowning moment for their illustrious careers – in Brazil. **WS**

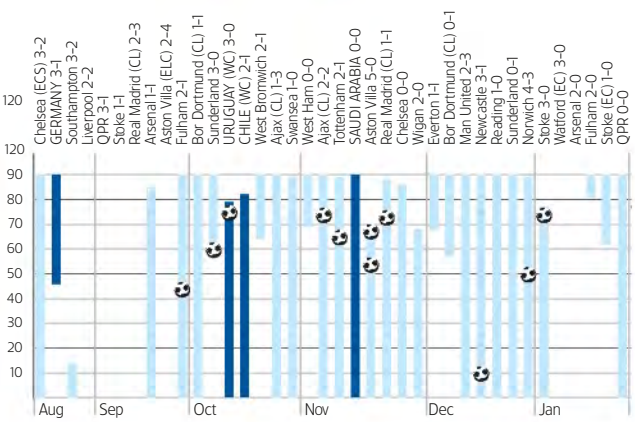
Last hope...brought on by Maradona in the 2010 World Cup quarter-final

- Independiente
- Atletico Madrid
- Manchester City
- Argentina

May 13, 2012 – scores the last-gasp winner that secures the Premier League title for Manchester City on the final day of the season.

Nov 21, 2012 – Iker Casillas saves a close-range Aguero effort as City crash out of the Champions League following a 1-1 draw at home to Real Madrid.

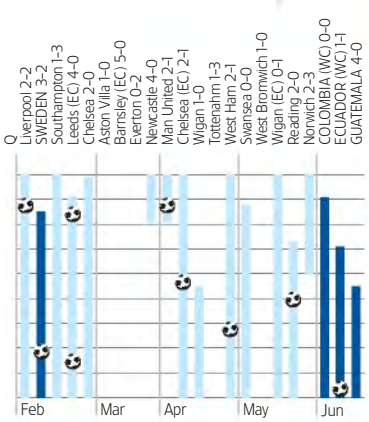


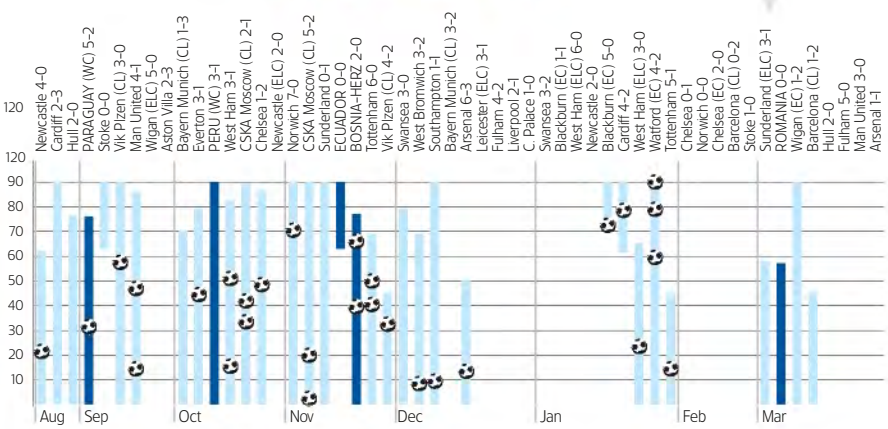


2012-13

May 11, 2013 – Aguero looks on in despair as a late header by Wigan Athletic's Ben Watson is enough to win the FA Cup at Wembley.

Mar 2, 2014 – returns from injury to play 58 minutes and help Manchester City to League Cup success against Sunderland at Wembley.





2013-14

World Cup Coaches

FACE TO FACE

All 32 of this summer's World Cup bosses interviewed

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"No Algerian team has ever qualified for the second round – that's a big incentive"

VAHID HALILHODZIC

How have your preparations gone so far and do you think your players will be ready for the experience of Brazil?
It's still too early to talk about that just yet, really. We have some problems preparing our players properly because we have so many who work abroad and they will all be available to us at different times. I'll work with the players from the Algerian championship first and then we'll have the rest joining us throughout May. Our biggest problem is the lack of time we have to work together, but we can't change that and we'll do the best we can in the circumstances. I understand that the World Cup is an exceptional tournament and so you really have to prepare well for it.

What particular issues do you face as a coach managing Algeria?
We're a small nation with a first World Cup objective of trying to win a match and then, if at all possible, of qualifying for the second round of the competition. No Algerian team has ever done that before, so that's a big incentive. Have we got the quality to succeed? Well it's tough, but I'm working really hard on looking at every little detail to give us the best possible chance.

Are you happy with the way your team performed in reaching Brazil?
This is a new group of players. When I took charge in 2011 I inherited a group that was at the end of a cycle. Those guys had very little ambition left, very little desire. I had to change a lot of things. The squad that will go to Brazil is a new group that has been three years in the making. There are a lot of young players, so this World Cup is probably a bit early for them, to be honest. But having said that, to qualify for Brazil we beat a very good Mali side that finished third in the last African Nations Cup. Then we knocked out a great Burkina Faso team in the play-offs. We should take confidence from results like that.

Surprises...Halilhodzic hopes to shock Belgium in their opening game

"I'm proud of what I've done with Algeria"

What does it mean to be the only team from north Africa to be appearing in the finals?
It's a huge thing. Plus we're the only Arab team in Brazil, which is also important. The Algerian supporters are very proud of the success we've had and now we have to concentrate on our work to make sure we represent them well. It's a huge challenge, but we'll do everything in our power to do just that.

Mind you, you've had your ups and downs with the Algerian press, haven't you..
Yes, but I don't know why it's like that. I have an odd relationship with the Algerian press. I don't understand the way they think. I believe a few of them are angry because I don't communicate with them all that much, but they've consistently written lies about me. Here's an example. They made a big thing out of the idea that the president of the Algerian Football Federation wanted me to sign a contract extension as soon as we qualified for the World Cup. But I would rather play in the tournament and then think about all that afterwards. It's not such a big deal, but the press made a huge thing out of it and I don't know why. I'm proud of what I've done with Algeria, the supporters like me and it's the supporters who make me want to carry on. As for the people who aren't happy with things, well that's their problem. I know what I'm doing and that's the most important thing.

Do you think the World Cup could be the making of players such as Sofiane Feghouli and Saphir Taider?
There are some boys in the team who can show they have real quality and there are definitely one or two who could do very well in Brazil. But the strength of the Algerian team is in the collective spirit. We don't have stars in the same way that some of the other African nations do; the Drogbas, the Essiens, the Eto'os.

You're in a tough group alongside Belgium, Russia and South Korea. How do you rate your chances?
I've watched tons of videos of all of our opponents, of course, and all three are very good teams. They're all very strong, both collectively and individually. I think South Korea are going to surprise a lot of people with how good they are.

Your first group match will be against Belgium. You could have had an easier start...
Belgium are one of the best teams in Europe and they have a huge amount of talent in their ranks. They're not one of the most experienced teams in the competition, but of course they'll be massive favourites when we meet. We'll try to come up with something to surprise them.

Interview by Howard Johnson

COUNTRIES COACHED IN

Yugoslavia	Velez Mostar	1990-92
France	Beauvais	1993–94
	Lille	1998-2002
	Rennes	2002–03
	Paris Saint-Germain	2003–05
Morocco	Raja Casablanca	1997–98
Turkey	Trabzonspor	2005–06
Saudi Arabia	Al Ittihad	2006
Ivory Coast	national team	2008–10
Croatia	Dinamo Zagreb	2010–11
Algeria	national coach	2011-present

“Argentina’s main enemy is ourselves. We have to go out and give 120 per cent”

ALEJANDRO SABELLA

Do you agree that Argentina are one of the favourites to win the World Cup?
I think the strongest teams are Brazil, Germany and Spain. Then there is a group of teams that are strong, but on a second level. We’re in that group.

Why has a European team never won the World Cup in America?
In Mexico there was the heat and altitude, and the USA was very hot, so those are two factors. In South America, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay are all very cold at that time of year. Brazil is a subcontinent within the continent. Teams who have to play in the north will find it harder. It was one of the things that worried us – not only the distances that pose a problem for recovery time, but also the climate.

Argentina have not passed the quarter-final stage since 1990. Is that a weight on your mind at all?
It is something we have to fix. We Argentinians always have that on our mind, and have to try to reach the last four. From the outset, reaching the semi-finals is our first objective.

In 2010, Lionel Messi didn’t score. How have his performances changed with the national team?
In the last World Cup he had many chances to score. I remember in the game against Nigeria – the keeper was excellent, it’s not that Messi played badly. I think now he is more mature, at least when it comes to playing with the national team. Maybe being captain helps make him feel important for the team too. He has greater responsibility and that made him develop quickly.

The comparisons between Messi and Diego Maradona continue. Are they viewed differently in Argentina?
Maradona was the best player in his time, and Messi is the best player now. Argentinians are very passionate about their football and both players are idolised. Maybe for Leo it was harder because he didn’t play in Argentina, he was seen as a “stranger” because he had always played in Spain. But both players were the best in the world in their day, and both are among the greatest players of all time.

Spoilt...Sabella has the best player in the world among his three strikers

Do you feel an obligation to play attacking football?
In football you have to attack, to defend, to play as a team and to close down the opposition. Obviously we have the best player in the world, and two exceptional strikers, so it is a very powerful attack. We also have [Angel] Di Maria who is very important for us. We have to try to find more balance because we will come up against strong teams.

Ever Banega is now at Newell’s Old Boys and Fernando Gago is with Boca Juniors. Did they consult you about moving back to Argentina?
They weren’t playing regularly in Europe. Between not playing and playing here, it levels out. They did ask me and I said that it depended on them. In both cases, the moves happened close to the end of the transfer window, they had to find a solution quickly. I agree that the quality is different, and it is something that is worrying, though they both are quality players.

You sometimes play five at the back. Is tactical flexibility important for the World Cup?
The most important thing is bringing out the best in the payers that you have. But I like to have a Plan B and maybe employ other tactics. We have used a five-man defence in certain games. It’s is a possibility during the World Cup.

Mature...Messi is Argentina’s captain

In 1998 you were Daniel Passarella’s assistant. What did you learn from that experience?
The main thing is recovery between games. In 1998 we played against England, which is a *clasico* for us. We played a day later than Holland, and also had to play extra time and penalties, with the added psychological pressure that brings. Then we had to play against Holland, and it was over 30 degrees. It was an even game, both could have won, but when you play a day later... you have to rest, it is very important.

What analysis have you made of your three group opponents?
We are still analysing them. It is not the Group of Death, which is not a phrase I like, but that’s what people call it. We didn’t get a group like that. Our main enemies are ourselves. We have to go onto the pitch giving 120 per cent and take each game as a final. Nigeria is a side Argentina has beaten in three World Cups, but only ever winning by one goal.

What does it mean to Argentinians to play a World Cup in Brazil?
It is a sporting rivalry more than anything. Politically, we are brothers. We are the motors of South America, we have to collaborate to improve Latin America. But, of course, there is a great sporting rivalry between what are two very strong sides.

Interview by Joel Richards

FROM THE PAST

Sabella spent part of his playing career in England. He joined Sheffield United from River Plate in 1978 and moved on to Leeds United in 1980.
He made a total of 99 league appearances for the two clubs before returning home in 1982.

“My job is to get people excited about the next great Australia team”

ANGE POSTECOGLOU

Five years ago, after leaving your role as coach of Australia's youth teams, you felt almost unemployable. How does it feel to go to a World Cup in charge of the senior national team?
I don't have time to pinch myself, but it has been a surreal ride, and when I do get time to reflect I sometimes do think about the journey. But there's so much going on. I just look ahead, not back.

You've been to under-age World Cups before. What will be the biggest difference this summer?
The enormity and the scale of it all. It's the biggest show on earth and you feel that on a daily basis; every conversation you have is centred around the World Cup. There is just so much work to be done, so my focus is just purely on the mechanics of what we are doing.

You couldn't have a much tougher group. Is your preparation about being ready for some of the best teams in the world or more about how Australia play?
It has to be a balance of the two. It's a great group from a football perspective – the other three nations [Chile, Holland and Spain] are known for playing some of the best football in the world. I said at the draw that I want us to contribute to that too. We have to understand and respect the opposition, but also make sure we are competitive. We want to measure ourselves against the best.

Does it help that no one believes you can reach the knockout stage?
It would help if the other countries underestimated us, but I doubt that will happen. The others will all expect to go through, but the reality is only two can. They'll be under pressure to beat us, which could work in our favour.

You also have a long-term brief to prepare for January's Asian Cup in Australia. Is it difficult to marry the two?
I don't think so because there is such an immediacy between them; we literally roll from one to the other. I've made a decision on what I saw and what needed to happen to regenerate the team. I wanted to do that now rather than wait. By doing it now it encompasses both tournaments. The difficulty was the timing of that regeneration.

The team is in transition from the golden generation of 2006. Do you have to find a balance between youth and experience?
You always start with the best man for the job. I won't leave anyone out whose form warrants playing at the World Cup, regardless of age. That's the starting point. But it's also about looking at players who will benefit from the experience. Currently, we don't have a lot of players playing at the highest level, irrespective of age. Ultimately, the bulk of the squad will be players who will benefit from being at a World Cup and around whom we'll hopefully be able to build afterwards.

Have Robbie Kruse and Rhys Williams' injuries disrupted your plans?
Yeah, absolutely. It's very disappointing for them. Both were in career-best form, and at an age when this World Cup and the next would be "their time". They were key to us moving forward, but they aren't going to be there so now we have to give the opportunity to someone else. The Asian Cup is now their goal. If we have a strong World Cup, then having those two guys to come in afterwards will only help us.

If the cap fits...Postecoglou will not hesitate to give young players a chance

How different is the national job to club coaching or management?
Vastly different. In the six months I've been here I have had five training sessions. But that doesn't mean I've been idle, if anything I've been busier. Club football has a routine – dissecting the last game, looking ahead to the next one. I also came in late to a World Cup campaign so there's been a hell of a lot to do. No time to reflect or be idle. But it's challenging and I like that.

What would make for a good World Cup finals this summer as far as Australia are concerned?
My primary aim is that, once the tournament is over, the Australian public are excited about this team again. If they are, it will mean we have shown something against the very best. We have to perform and get people excited about the next great Australian national team. That's my role.

Interview by Simon Hill

TROPHIES WON

Postecoglou is Australia's most successful club coach of all time, winning:

"The World Cup is a present for these Belgium players"

MARC WILMOTS

You've said your predecessor Dick Advocaat, who was in charge for only six-and-a-half months, has played a major part in Belgium's revival. How come?
He introduced a new way of thinking and playing football. Regardless of the opponent, he stuck to his principles. He was also a good motivator and could tie people to a certain course. And there was also space for discussion and participation. His motto was "my way or the highway". I'm still working according to this principle. However, because we have a young group, I'm a bit more flexible. But the nucleus of Advocaat's vision still stands: clarity. I've learned a lot from him.

What has changed in the set-up?
Every player has his own hotel room, for example. Before Advocaat that wasn't the case. It's important because one player wants to sleep at 10pm while his room-mate still wants to watch TV until 1am. If there is a good reason, then for me everything is open for debate. Like bringing a barber to the hotel. At first I thought "no way". But, thinking about it, these are all players abroad who can't explain over there how they want their hair done. That is easier at home. Headphones in the bus, I can live with that, but as soon as we arrive it is over. And I want them to greet the stewards, because my players should behave like normal people.

When you were playing it wasn't so professional, then...
Not even close. It was pure amateurism. Incredible. Why do we let that happen? Do you really think that they would listen to us? Those people back then didn't have a clue what top sport was all about.

There is a lot of competition in the squad. How do you cope with that?
One of our strong points during the qualifiers was the quality of the bench. I make sure that everybody is involved in the good and the bad things that happen. I want them to understand that they are part of this team and can make the difference. Their job is to hold on to a good result or victory. That has made the difference in the last four or five games.

Here's to Brazil...Wilmots toasts the prospect of a good World Cup

Is keeping a team satisfied during the qualifiers easier than at the World Cup?
Immediately after the World Cup the Euro 2016 qualification will start, so there is no room for egos. We've worked so hard to come this far and I won't let that be destroyed by anybody. That said, we must also be aware that this is a young group from a country which had not qualified for big tournaments for the past 12 years. The World Cup is also a present for these players.

Many players in the current national team have played in Holland for a long time. Is that education part of the team's identity?
They have definite skills and a good build-up. Using the long ball or playing neat passes isn't a problem for them. But it's important that these players make the next step in time. In Holland players usually learn only one system. There aren't many one-on-one battles, therefore it's important to move on if they want to improve.

The national team is, at last, united. How have you managed that?
By working together, players and fans united. At training the gate is open for the crowd, but we also set challenges. For instance, by asking the fans to come to the matches dressed in red. By asking them to make as much noise as possible. By creating a special fan block for women. That all has tightened the bond.

> "We are at work. Does your wife go to your work with you?"

You've said that women aren't allowed in the hotel. Why?
After a match we have to travel back to our base and there are only four days between the matches. I don't think that the players can be occupied with their families when they can qualify for the second round or the quarter-finals. The idea is based on my own experiences. During the World Cups in 1994 and 1998 there was trouble. Don't forget, we are at work. Does your wife go to your work with you? The World Cup is all about football and resting.

A lot of players aren't regulars at club level. Is that a problem?
I told them in January they should make a decision to increase their playing time. A transfer or going on loan; either way, they had to find a solution. A player who isn't a regular during the last three or four months will get in trouble at the World Cup. Not being physically fit will lead to tiredness and that will lead to making the wrong decisions on the pitch.

What do you think about the draw?
Playing against South Korea, Algeria and Russia means we are favourites to reach the next round. So we have at least three matches and maybe more. But that will only happen if we play each of them as if it's a final.

Interview by Foot Magazine/ESM

WORLD CUP PLAYING RECORD

Belgium's leading all-time scorer in World Cup finals with five goals, Wilmots went to four tournaments as a player and appeared in three

FINALS		GAMES PLAYED	GOALS SCORED
ITALY	1990	NONE	NONE
USA	1994	●	
FRANCE	1998	●●●	●●
STH KOREA/JAPAN	2002	●●●●	●●●

"A team with limited resources like Bosnia must avoid injuries before the World Cup"

SAFET SUSIC

On their way...Susic and the Bosnia bench celebrate an important victory away to Slovakia in the qualifiers

Can we expect your list of 30 players to be published before the June deadline?
I am not fond of calling up players just to have more competition. I was a player and I don't think it is good for a player to be aware that he is on the wider list and then disappoint him when he finds out that he'll not be part of the squad. As with all teams, we do have to have 30 names on the wider list, but the fact is that 23 of them will start the camp on May 15 in Sarajevo and they will be the 23 names that will travel to Brazil. I will not publish the list of 30; one of the players from the reserve list can get in only if someone gets injured.

In qualifying, 36 players were called up but only 24 played. Is this a sign that your team is already picked and there is no place for new names?
I will be honest and tell you that it is difficult to expect big surprises. However, we are keeping track of every Bosnian player and we'll see if there is any World Cup material. What is certain is the most important criteria will be playing time and form for their clubs. Players who are not regulars for their clubs will not have a place in the World Cup squad.

"Players who are not playing for their clubs will not have a place in the squad"

This is the first major competition for Bosnia-Herzegovina. Was it harder to plan your preparations?
I don't think so. I have experience from the World Cup as a player, so this is not a new thing for me. We are gathering in the suburbs of Sarajevo on May 15 and we'll spend the first 12 days back home in Bosnia. After that we travel to the US, to distance ourselves from the euphoria at home and play two friendlies. We will play Ivory Coast on May 30 in St Louis and Mexico on June 3 in Chicago. After that we go to Brazil, to our base in Guaruja, and we'll play Santos just before the World Cup.

Two 2-0 losses in the last two friendlies – to Argentina and Egypt – brought a lot of criticism and some internal troubles. Is this a distraction before the World Cup?
It's like that in football; one day you are a hero, the next day you are the one to blame for everything. But I don't think this will be a problem before the World Cup. Sometimes it is good to lose, to highlight some of the problems you have so you can solve them. I hope the two friendlies against strong opposition will regain that good atmosphere from the qualifiers. We will have to change the approach, that is for sure. And what is most important for a team with limited resources like ours is to avoid any injuries before the World Cup.

How do you assess your group opponents this summer?
You don't have to be a big expert to see that Argentina are the clear favourites in our group. We played them a couple of months ago and we once again saw their quality. The positive thing for us is that we play them in our opening match, when many favourites have historically had trouble. Our crucial match will be Nigeria. They have a very good team, with some very good players, but I honestly don't think they are at the same level as in the past. When it comes to Iran, we know less about them, but they have an experienced coach and we will have to be at our best to confirm our status as favourites in that match.

Interview by Sasa Ibrulj

INTERNATIONAL APPEARANCES

AS A PLAYER	
Yugoslavia (1977–90)	54 games/21 goals
Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993)	2 games/ 0 goals

Friendly..Bosnia face Argentina again in their group

"If we keep working as we have been, then it's hard to see us being defeated"

LUIZ FELIPE SCOLARI

What are your first memories of the World Cup?
Listening to games from 1958, and then 1962 on the radio, when the broadcast still had that interference noise, with the difficulty of it being transmitted from so far away. I was 10 in 1958, 14 in 1962, and with the two wins, and all the talk of Brazilian football, this impregnated me with a liking for the game.

What was the big challenge when you returned to the Brazil team at the end of 2012?
The big question was how were we going to play? We had doubts in the first four matches, which were friendlies – it's hard to do this without taking part in the qualifiers, which are great to play in because they give you a parameter to measure your progress. We were looking for a formation, a tactical system and the players to fit into this tactical system, and now that's what we have. We don't have the experience of other Brazil sides – 2002, for example. But we have speed and dynamism that few other teams can count on. And if we keep working as we have been, in this rhythm, with this spirit that the players have, then it's hard to see us being defeated.

And in winning the Confederations Cup you also won over the home fans. How important was that?
Brazil will receive visitors with the maximum amount of affection possible. The Brazilian people receive and treat everyone well. But on the field we have to impose ourselves, with our players backed by the support of our fans, which is fundamental. We want the people to come with us on this campaign, to participate in it.

Is there a danger of the players getting caught in the atmosphere of the tournament?
We have to protect our players because we need some privacy. Granja Comary in Teresopolis (in the hills outside Rio) is ideal for this, since it gives us some tranquillity. It might be a bit cold up there in the hills, but it's better to have a bit of cold rather than heat. It's our home, we can train there whenever we want. We want to help our sponsors and give them visibility, we don't want to hide from our people. But we need to have these events in an established context.

Game plan...Scolari believes that Brazil have what it takes to be champions

"Qualifiers are great because they give you parameters to measure your progress"

Are you worried about talk of the ghost of 1950?
My vision of 1950 is totally different from the way that some people imagine. Before 1950 Brazil had never reached the Final. The players from that campaign are the precursors of the five titles we've won. So we have to value what they did in the history of Brazilian football, and then afterwards we all took a ride on it, on what they did in 1950. And let's hope that we get there again, that we reach another Final in the Maracana and that we remember 1950, which was marvellous, fantastic.

Just with a different result...
We're not just favourites – we have the duty of winning the World Cup. We know that there is only one path. Would you accept being second? No one would accept this. So let's go to work thinking of finishing first. We're not going into the tournament just to compete, to take part. No! We're going to win any way we can. We need to get to the final and be crowned champions. And we have what it takes to be champions.

Who do you see as the other leading challengers?
The main threats are Germany, Spain, Argentina. After that, I think that Roy Hodgson is doing an excellent job with England. Holland have a team of good technical quality. I am wary of all the South American sides.

Interview by Tim Vickery

SCOLARI'S CAREER BY COUNTRY

	TEAMS COACHED
BRAZIL	CSA (1982), Juventude (1982–83), Brasil de Pelotas (1983), Brasil de Pelotas (1986), Juventude (1986–87), Gremio (1987), Goias (1988), Criciuma (1991), Gremio (1993–96), Palmeiras (1997–2000), Cruzeiro (200-01), national team (2001–02), Palmeiras (2010-12), national team (2012-present)
SAUDI ARABIA	Al Shabab (1984–85), Al Ahli (1991)
KUWAIT	Al Qadisiya (1988–90), national team (1990), Al Qadisiya (1992)
JAPAN	Jubilo Iwata (1996–97)
PORTUGAL	national team (2003-08)
ENGLAND	Chelsea (2008-09)
UZBEKISTAN	Bunyodkor (2009–10)

World Cup Coaches
CAMEROON

“Eto’o can make the difference”

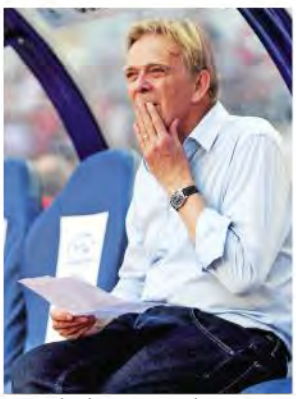
VOLKER FINKE

What are your chances at the World Cup?
We start against Mexico, then Croatia and then the bonus, in Brasilia against Brazil. We have to prepare well against Mexico and Croatia to pick up enough points to see us through to the second round so we don’t have to worry about the result against Brazil.

And how do you feel about playing the hosts?
As a coach you don’t need to deliver any motivation; for any player to get the chance to play against Brazil is a real highlight in their career. We know that for most you work in football for 20 to 30 years but there will never be more than one chance in a career to participate in a World Cup in Brazil. It is a really good adventure, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This is the land of football; it’s emotion, technique, music, rhythm, dance. Brazil is much, much more than Qatar or something like that. To play there will be fun. I’m a little worried things might not be ready on time – things like the airports which could affect us. It has to be run well, especially because it is in Brazil.

How much do Cameroon still depend on Samuel Eto’o?
Eto’o is our best player. He can make the difference and I’m very pleased that he has left behind his Russia experience. I think that at Chelsea he is coming back to his best level. This is why I hope he can make the difference also for us at the World Cup.

So are the problems between him and the rest of the team something of the past?
I’m pleased to say yes. He remains a match-winning performer. But even when there has been conflict, the players have left that behind when they have gone out onto the pitch.


No motivation needed...Finke

Can Cameroon be a surprise package in Brazil?
Who can be a surprise? Football today is about depth; you need a minimum of 10-12 players of top ability. They have to give to the team, this is the way. It is no longer about just one or two players but having many players, each of whom can make a difference.

Would it be fair to say that Cameroon did not impress during the qualifiers?
We were not always at our best – but at the crucial moments, the team functioned really well. There was the goalless draw in Kinshasa [against the Democratic Republic of Congo], where a loss would have been catastrophic, the 1-0 win over Libya [to finish top of their group] and especially the 4-1 win over Tunisia [to secure a place in Brazil via the play-offs]. These are proof of their ability to achieve when they need to.

Football administration in Cameroon has collapsed with an interim federation in place to run affairs. How has that impacted on your work?
That is so political it’s not something I want to talk about. It’s all I get asked about and talking about it really does not help anything around the team.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

World Cup Coaches
CHILE

“Chile has to attack. We won’t change”

JORGE SAMPAOLI

Who is Jorge Sampaoli?
I’m humble, hard working and passionate. As a coach I always want to make a revolution where I’m working. I try to generate new things, change structures, that’s my main characteristic. When I leave a place, I hope everyone remembers me as a common man who works a lot and loves his profession.

What do you teach the players?
I try to transmit things people are not used to. I try to be accessible, build a good relationship, not just professional but personal. I tell them they don’t have to give up their dreams and that they have to always give 110 per cent to get the best out of every day. They have to love the colours they stand for. You don’t have to play soccer just for the money.

What are Chile’s expectations for the finals?
We need to show the high level of Chilean footballers. We have built a strong team that managed to make very good displays, especially collectively, and results. We have to play without fear against the best teams in the world. We must be competitive.

Forward thinking...Sampaoli insists Chile will not change their style in Brazil

Will Chile’s style depend on their opponents?
My idea is that Chile must have a leading role in all their matches. Chile won’t change their style. There’s no way Chile will wait in their half of the pitch, Chile has to attack always. We won’t change our style.

How will Chile play during the first round?
We will attack. If we wait to see what our rivals do, it will be impossible to win. We have to equal Spain’s ball possession. Holland have a fast transition, so that’s what we have to nullify. Australia are a team with a very strong defence. We’ll have to fight against lots of players in defensive positions. But Chile must not win at any cost. I wouldn’t sleep tight if we beat a team playing in a way different from our way.

Are your team strong enough to get far in the finals?
We will have chances only if we are collectively strong. Individually we can’t compete against Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Germany or Italy. We have players who are playing great in some of the best clubs around Europe. The rest play some matches and watch others from the bench, and some of them are playing really very little.

How do you manage fans’ anxiety? They want to see Chile win the World Cup...
Fans are excessively confident in their evaluation of the team. We had a great qualifying campaign, but that doesn’t mean that we can be champions. They must realise that at a World Cup you play the best teams. In November we beat England at Wembley but four days later we lost against Brazil. That shows that it won’t be easy when we have to face top teams every four or five days.

Interview by Javier Leira

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TOP of the POPS

"For Colombia to be top seeds is an historic achievement"

JOSE PEKERMAN

How did you come to be offered the Colombia job?
Colombia was going through a tough time when I took the job. I had received offers from different continents and wasn't sure whether I wanted to accept the challenge. Other coaches had turned the position down, but when I saw what good players they had it convinced me of what we could achieve.

And this is Colombia's first World Cup finals appearance in 16 years...
We always made qualification our goal. There were ups and downs along the way, but we have worked hard and this is a just reward for knowing how to manage the South American qualifiers and overcome our difficulties. We have a wonderful team. I'm proud of them.

How do you see the draw?
It's fantastic to be group seeds. I don't know how many South American countries have ever been top seeds, but for us it's an historic achievement. Our group is really even. We have a good Asian side [Japan], a team in Ivory Coast who have qualified for the last three World Cups, and Greece, who may not be as well known as the other sides but are still strong and deserve respect. With a country from South America, Asia, Africa and Europe, it will be interesting to see these different styles.

What of Colombia's chances?
We have managed to become one of the best countries in the world because we have a lot of competitive and hard-working players who understand international football. We're very confident and know we're capable of doing well in Brazil, but at the same time there's a lot of respect for those countries ranked below us in the FIFA standings. This doesn't stop us from being candidates, however.

How will you play if Radamel Falcao isn't fit? Is there a Plan B?
It's too soon for speculation about Falcao or a Plan A or Plan B – this doesn't seem fair for a player of his standing. He is following a medical plan but we are not going to talk about a timescale because that would be really unprofessional. We have a lot of specific information about his injury, but right now it's not fair to talk of alternatives.

You have encouraged Colombia to play an attacking style...
We are always looking to score, but this sometimes costs us and so we have to search for that famous balance. We have to understand that always pushing three or four men forward means we also have to fight to get the ball back. When we do this we look perfect, but when we don't we suffer. Some people say we concede too many goals because our defenders aren't up to scratch but I don't agree. I believe it is the responsibility of the whole team and, of course, in this respect we have to improve.

"It's too soon to speculate about Falcao – it does not seem fair for a player of his standing"

Seeking a balance...Pekerman wants to see more defensive responsibility

How have your preparations been disrupted by the injuries?
At the end of qualifying we were really pleased we had made it back to the World Cup finals, but of course we could never have imagined the amount of problems we were going to have. It's been really hard to take and it leaves us worried, but we are just going to have to wait on those players who have been injured and hope other problems don't occur. It's undoubtedly disrupted our plans.

What do you think the future holds for Colombia?
We must map a vision for the future. Young players must be brought into the first-team squad because that's how the process is maintained over time and how a high standard is achieved. You can't just work on what's just around the corner. We have called up Juan Fernando Quintero even though he's only played a few top-level games for Porto, and we are also planning for the future with players like Stefan Medina and Santiago Arias.

Interview by Carl Worswick

Key component...but injury has put Falcao's World Cup in the balance

COUNTRIES WORKED IN

TEAM COACHED		HONOURS
Argentina under-20s	1994–2001	Under-20 World Cup 1995 Under-20 World Cup 1997 Under-20 World Cup 2001
Argentina national team	2004–2006	
Toluca (Mex)	2007–2008	
Tigres (Mex)	2009	
Colombia national team	2012–present	

"If Costa Rica play badly, I am the person most responsible"

JORGE LUIS PINTO

What are your expectations for Costa Rica in Brazil?
We're going to face three strong teams [England, Italy and Uruguay], teams with World Cup pedigree, and that will motivate us and make us get a better feeling of the tournament. It will make us react better on the pitch.

Is it an advantage to be drawn in such a group?
It is and it isn't. Italy are a difficult team, we know everything they have done at World Cups, as with England. Uruguay have a generation who may need some new blood but are very tough. You ask yourself why they keep those [players] and it's because they're the ones that deliver; those who are on the fringe still haven't shown the necessary ability. There is no doubt that they have two very important men in [Luis] Suarez and [Edinson] Cavani. When your team can score, football is easy.

How will you stop them?
We'll have to somehow. Our defence is balanced, tough, very efficient. I'd say if Costa Rica have one good thing it's their defensive system, which is not just the four or five defenders.

What are your thoughts on Italy?
I never saw a team start a World Cup so badly as Italy in '82 – and then end up as world champions. I admire Italy, they're a very compact team, with lots of quality, who like to play out of defence. They don't take the game to their opponents and that's given them good results.

And what about England?
They are the fastest of the three: explosive, less clear, with less football but they give you attacking options.

Wayne Rooney, Mario Balotelli, Luis Suarez – who will be the hardest to face?
All three! We'll have to find ways to mark them. That will be one of Costa Rica's weapons: tactical order and efficient marking of those players. I think that's how we can get something [from these matches].

Costa Rica have never beaten Uruguay, England or Italy...
Let's hope this is the moment.

What about your own players?
I've never liked making distinctions, those who don't stand out are also good players. Sometimes the media only see those who shine, but we have midfielders and central defenders with a lot of quality, experience and we have to recognise this. I can't leave out Giancarlo Gonzalez, a hard-working defender who doesn't shine but gives a lot. Or the game reading and control of Michael Umana, who is not an exceptional or brilliant player but who does have a lot of qualities.

What about tactics?
I like versatile players who can do more than one thing very well. I like players who know how to play in several positions because that's part of our profession, of what we want, defensively and in attack. But more than anything I like a steady player, not one who has a moment's brilliance but keeps you waiting for that moment. I need a consistent player. We've made several tactical changes and this squad can manage that. Maybe not all the players equally, but the great majority.

Is a World Cup finals the summit for a coach?
Yes, it's the most important [competition], though maybe for Europeans it's the Champions League. Jose Mourinho said the Champions League is almost more important than a World Cup and he could be right to some degree.

Being Colombian, what is it like being a foreign coach in charge of a national team?
It's an added responsibility and commitment because all the pressure is on you directly; the fans, the media, you have to give more. If Costa Rica play badly, I am the person most responsible, not the players.

Priorities...Pinto will trade fleeting brilliance in favour of reliability

Danger...Uruguay's Cavani (left) and Suarez

Costa Rica faced Mexico and the USA in qualifying. How do you think they will get on in Brazil?
It's hard to fathom Mexico, there's no clear picture, they're like a government with a president and you don't know what to expect from them. They could do a lot or very little, there's no stability. They could be a great team because they have the players, but they could be a surprise and suffer elimination. I'd say, with respect, that if they want to succeed they must let [coach Miguel] Herrera get on with his ideas and plans. The United States are a very good team, they have players who make things happen, they are very strong physically, and committed. [Jurgen] Klinsmann has World Cup experience as a coach and player, and he can benefit from that.

Interview by Javier Leira

HONOURS WON

Pinto has won league titles in four different countries

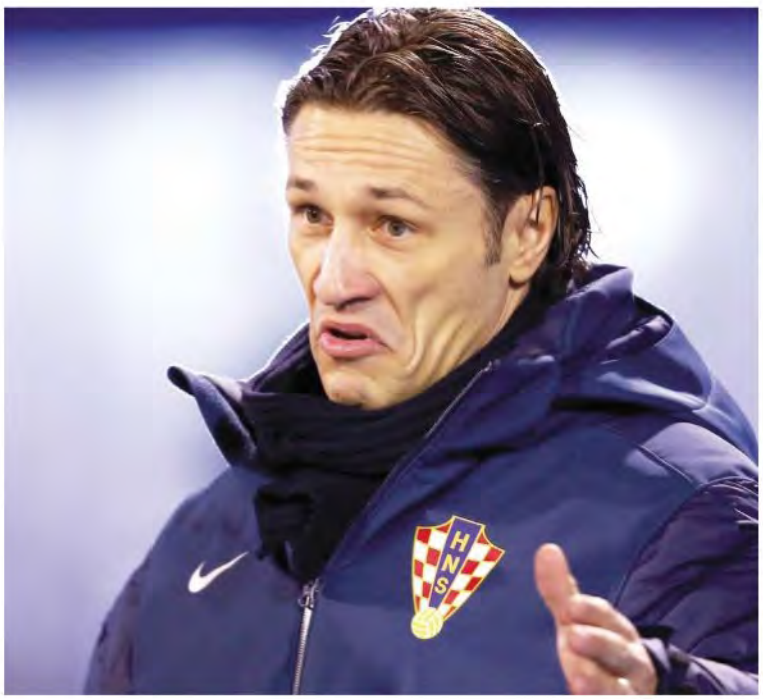
Colombia	2006 clausura
Costa Rica	2002 apertura
Costa Rica	2003 clausura
Costa Rica	2003 apertura
Peru	1997
Venezuela	2011

“Age makes no difference; Croatia will use the best players available”

NIKO KOVAC

What did you learn from the 2-2 draw with Switzerland in March?
Our team showed two faces: the first half, when we played a full-strength side [and conceded twice], was not the best; the second was much better. Basically, the game highlighted what areas we still have to work on. Everyone has to play their part in defending from the front. From day one I have insisted on joint action in defence and attack. When a team is compact and well organised, everyone looks good. To put it simply, everyone must pay attention to the defensive tasks.

What can Croatia achieve in Brazil?
We want to achieve a positive result, but it will be equally imperative for us to improve our game. I do not like to predict or make any promises. I am confident that we have the players to enjoy the games. I think we have a group of players who can all take part in another qualifying cycle [for Euro 2016], assuming they stay fit.


Matter of choice...Niko Kovac feels half his squad are already sure of a place on the plane to Brazil

High hopes...Mateo Kovacic hurdles a challenge during the friendly against Switzerland

“We cannot use the climate as an excuse for a poor showing”

BACKROOM STAFF

Niko Kovac has five assistants, including his brother, Robert

Igor Jukic

Goran Lackovic

Vatroslav Mihacic

Robert Kovac

Branimir Ujevic

Have you already decided on the 30 players for your short list?
There's about 15 who are pretty sure of their place and they will, if healthy, be on the plane to Brazil. All the other places are open. We are watching and tracking everybody because there are still three months to a decision. As for the formula that decide the places, I want to duplicate every position we have.

Several of your squad are currently playing in Ukraine. Is this a problem?
I hope the situation in Ukraine can be resolved peacefully. In the past we have always had players who have had difficulties playing at particular clubs. With what I know of the situation in Ukraine, I do not see it as a special problem.

Will you take some of the younger players to Brazil?
It doesn't matter whether they are older or younger if they deserve to be a part of the Croatian national team. So whoever we take will be the best available players who will be useful for us.

You know a lot about group rivals Brazil, but Mexico and Cameroon are quite unfamiliar...
Our scouts, Mario Cvitanovic and Andrej Panadic, have great football experience. I will rely on them as our experts. We all hold the same beliefs on today's football.

Will the climate in Brazil be a handicap for Croatia?
Sure. We are the only team in our group not used to such conditions. Brazil are the hosts, Mexico are from Latin America, Cameroon often play in the same conditions. But we cannot use climate as an excuse for a poor showing.

Who are your coaching role models?
I'm glad I was trained by experts in various fields, different nationalities and football schools, so I gained quite a broad experience. I use everything that agrees with my philosophy. At the same time, you can learn from what you did not like as a player. However, I would not single out any one coach as a role model.

Interview by Zdravko Reic

"Ecuadorians need to experience other cultures to help the national team to grow"

REINALDO RUEDA

Generation gap...Rueda wishes he had more experience in his squad

What are your expectations at the World Cup?
To get past the group phase, that wish is almost a commitment. It is not easy against very mature, well-structured teams. To get through would fortify us and anything can happen after that.

Is there an advantage playing European teams in South America?
I don't think so. Maybe being in South America can become an advantage for a semi-final or Final, I don't think it is in the group stage.

You coached group opponents Honduras four years ago. Is that an advantage for you, or for them who know you?
It will work both ways; they know our work, our tactical order. It will all be down to that intensity because Honduras have players of a high standard. A good part of their 2010 squad remains and is strong. There's no real advantage, it's more about bilateral knowledge.

Eye-catching... Jefferson Montero has the skills to make him a standout in Brazil

You like to attack down the wings...
Well, we have the good fortune to have players who can tip the balance on the flanks. It's like a culture they have acquired from when they were young and it's one of our best options.

Antonio Valencia has earned a reputation worldwide, but what about left-winger Jefferson Montero?
He has already played in Europe. He went to Real Betis, then Villarreal and Levante, but Betis was his best period. He has excellent skills, let's hope he can settle [in Mexico with Morelia]. There are some tactical issues he can improve on but he's the kind of player who fills the eyes of the spectators because he plays that street game, throwing opponents off balance, daring. He's going to be a great player.

How do you see your group rivals?
All three have an advantage that they were in South Africa, so most of their squads are going to repeat the World Cup experience. France have brilliant individuals like [Franck] Ribery, [Karim] Benzema, [Olivier] Giroud, but for me Switzerland are very much a team and very difficult (to beat).

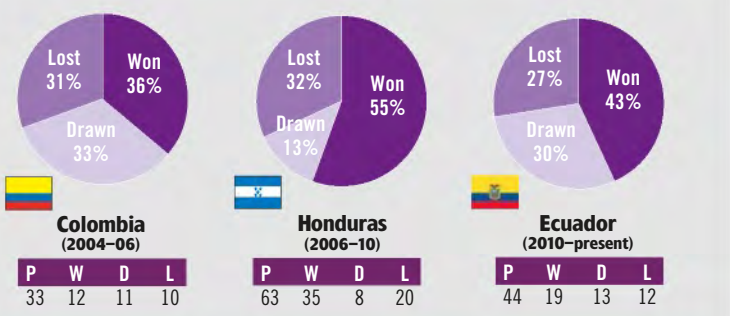
You have few experienced players...
The young players have good skills but there's been a generational gap and we only have [Segundo] Castillo and Valencia left from the 2006 World Cup because the players who reached the finals in Germany were above the average age and have fallen out of contention. Experience is vital, though it can be compensated with impetus, motivation, and hunger to try to surprise big teams.

Ecuador, in their search for players for the national team, have a fairly small pool...
Ecuadorian players still find it hard to adapt to other footballing cultures. There are exceptions who maintain their form or improve it and their move abroad is for the good, but others have come back because their talent is wasted. They have even lost their way and are no longer good enough for the domestic game and even less so the national team. They suffer the impact of frustration and don't recover. It's very important for the Ecuadorian game that players should reach another dimension and assimilate it well. There are other cultures it would be good for them to experience. That would help the domestic game and the national team to grow.

Have you missed the day-to-day work at a club? Will you be looking for something different after the World Cup?
Yes, you certainly miss it because at national-team level a lot of your work is on paper, in planning, because there is little time to work [with the players]. Some day I hope to get the chance to return to a club. It's been good working with national teams but it's another dynamic, a different sort of responsibility.

Interview by Rex Gowar

NATIONAL TEAMS COACHED



"The World Cup is like the Grand National"

ROY HODGSON

Who are the favourites to win this World Cup?
I think everyone has to accept that a South American nation will have the burden of being favourites because it is being played on their continent. In the past they have always triumphed when it has been played in South America. I suppose this leads directly to Brazil and Argentina, and perhaps also to Uruguay who have a good World Cup record. Of the Europeans, you wouldn't look outside the obvious favourites of Germany and Spain because they have been very successful in recent years.

Who will be the dark horses for this tournament?
Colombia and Chile are the obvious dark horses for me because of the South American connection. I think the European teams will be surprised by the quality of these sides. Having played Chile recently they are definitely ones to watch. They were very impressive when they played at Wembley in November. Italy did very well in the Confederations Cup last summer and that experience will stand them in good stead, so I would see them as another dark horse. I don't know much about the Africans or Central American teams so I can't really comment on them, but there might be one among them.

How do you view England's group opponents Italy, Uruguay and Costa Rica?
It's not an easy group to face Italy and Uruguay because they are both as highly rated as ourselves. It's like having three seeded teams in one group rather than two, which is a bit unlucky. But I think it's a good group and an interesting one. We played Italy in the quarter-finals of Euro 2012. There is a nice balance with one South American and one Central American team. I thought the draw was quite kind to us in terms of logistics. Having decided to base ourselves in Rio it was favourable to have matches in Sao Paulo and Belo Horizonte, and only one longer-haul trip to Manaus.

In past World Cups it seems England have played better football in tough groups than in so-called "easy" sections. Does it help psychologically that the team has to go straight into a big match against Italy?
It's all to do with people's perceptions. What's easy and what's not easy? We are fortunate this time the perception is that this is not an easy group and I suppose that is advantageous. Sometimes I hear opinions about groups that I don't always share. When you are in a World Cup, with three knockout matches played in quick succession, anything can happen. There are no mugs at the tournament – that's the bottom line. The one thing you can guarantee is that all 32 teams who have qualified will be competitive and highly motivated and playing with the feeling of a dream fulfilled. That alone means you couldn't possibly have an easy game. What you have to hope is that you have more quality than the opponents and that this quality will shine through.

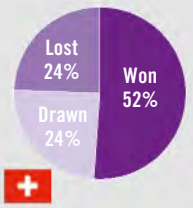
What lessons did you learn from England's time at the Euro 2012 tournament?
One of the lessons is that you need a very strong squad and a strong bench. You need a lot of players who are more than capable of being in the first XI because three matches in quick succession tires people out physically. I thought we looked a more exhausted team than Italy in that quarter-final, albeit that the players did fantastically well to take it to penalties. We were much fresher in our earlier games and that is something we are putting our minds to – to make sure that if we progress from our group we have the players who can deal with that. We need enough players so that we can rest people if that's required. We didn't feel at the time we had enough strength in depth, and we think we do now.

Spot of trouble... Ashley Young misses against Italy at Euro 2012

You have several tough choices between star veterans and talented youngsters. Does the physical aspect of the tournament have a bearing on those choices?
Everything has to come into the equation. As a coach you have lived for years with the classic dilemma of youth or experience. It's true in all sports. Coaches always have to sort that out. There is no right or wrong answer here. It will mean some quite difficult decisions on several positions.

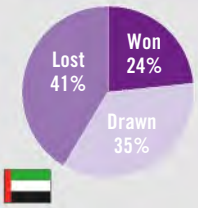
What are the biggest challenges for an England manager preparing for a major tournament like a World Cup?
The main one is getting the squad right; that you have chosen the best possible combination of players. One of the things you have to consider when assembling the group is that they gel together. The history of the World Cup shows up examples of how dissension in the camp can hinder the team. You think of France in 2002 perhaps, and some Dutch teams have suffered from the same thing. World Cups are never easy because in a normal career a player doesn't spend five or six weeks away

NATIONAL TEAMS MANAGED



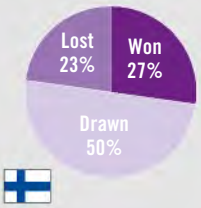
Switzerland (1992-95)

P	W	D	L
41	21	10	10



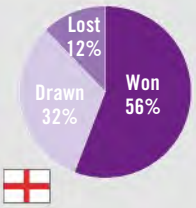
United Arab Emirates (2002-04)

P	W	D	L
17	4	6	7



Finland (2006-07)

P	W	D	L
22	6	11	5



England (2012-present)

P	W	D	L
25	14	8	3

Best seat in the house...Hodgson surveys the Arena da Amazonia in Manaus, where England face Italy in their opening group match

from the normal routine, and having to concentrate and cope with the pressures being heaped on him by the expectation from home.

So what qualities will you look for?
It requires a special type of person. If you get unhappiness or disharmony it can affect performances. We are very anxious that doesn't happen to us as well. Whatever you decide on selection it will provoke some debate about players who have not been selected, but that's true for every nation. The other thing is the preparation for all the pitfalls of playing in the climate in South America. Those challenges are important. We have to get the players in the best possible mental and physical condition. We want it all to depend on the question: are we good enough to win the matches? We don't want to finish wondering about what might have happened if we had prepared better. We will be well prepared, well organised and highly motivated. I have to assume the other teams will be too. The Italians will be considering all the things we are.

Will the climate affect the style of play for England?
It probably will. I don't think there will be massive changes of style, but there will certainly be nuances, as in the use of substitutions. They may be nuances in where teams start their pressing, and you may see more occasions when they drop off and let the opponents' back four have the ball. There's no doubt that keeping the ball is going to be very important. When you give the ball away against World Cup teams you are going to have to work very hard to get it back, and that will sap your energy. You have to make sure you harness the players' energy as best you can.

> "The history of the World Cup shows up examples of how dissension in the camp can hinder the team"

England are 11th favourites with the bookmakers to win this World Cup. Is that a fair reflection of the team's international standing?
I'm not a great believer in bookmakers' odds. You could compare the World Cup to a horse-racing event like the Cheltenham Festival or the Grand National. An expert might be able to identify technically the best horse, but will that horse actually win? I really don't mind whether we are favourites or bottom of the list because we don't pay any attention to that. We won't be disheartened by the fact we are 11th favourites, no more than we might be boosted if we were considered top contenders to win the tournament. There might be 10 better teams than us at the World Cup; there might not. It's up to us to prove we are good enough.

New boy knocking... Lallana is making a strong case to be on the plane to Brazil

You have introduced previously unconsidered players like Adam Lallana and Rickie Lambert of Souhampton. How pleased are you with their progress?
They have knocked on the door. We do a lot of scouting and there is not a serious game played at a high level that we don't have a report on. It has been a case of players like Lallana and Lambert, and Raheem Sterling and Daniel Sturridge at Liverpool, hitting you in the eye. And that's how it should be. If we are talking about the England team, anyone should be able to watch a match and afterwards say "yes, that's the player; this one is special". We are lucky that quite a few of the players we have brought in have shown that they have something very special. They do it

consistently and force you to sit up and take notice.

How much does the lack of a winter break affect the England team?
It is a debate which has raged for years. There are many people who think a break would be a good thing – and I'm in that category – to give players a mental and physical rest, and to split the season up a bit. You wouldn't have such a compromised season and then such a long spell without competitive football. The middle of May to the middle of August in most years for most players is a long time. As a result you get very long pre-seasons, for maybe six weeks. Sometimes I found that players were at their freshest then, and by the time the league started they were losing it again. Whether it would be a great advantage for the World Cup, who knows. I just think it would be a benefit to football generally. I know one thing: it wouldn't harm England's prospects at major tournaments. It could only be good. But it will never happen, no matter how many people want it and however many articles are written about it.

Alex Ferguson believes there hasn't been a really good World Cup since 1986 and that the rise of the Champions League has affected the tournament. Does he have a point?
I think it's dangerous when comments come from somebody who is more associated with one competition than the other. Alex hasn't worked at a World Cup since 1986, which is interesting. It's much better when you are taking part. I was manager of Switzerland at the 1994 tournament and I thought it was fantastic. Maybe it would have been different if I was a club coach watching from afar. What makes a good World Cup? Is it exciting matches and lots of goals? That can be too simplistic. Great games can finish 0-0. There is a lot at stake in every World Cup match. It's the same in the Champions League. I'm not certain how many great games you see in the Champions League. How many great Finals have there been? There is a definite factor here: the more important games are, the less attractive they are likely to be. Also, the higher the level of matches, the fewer mistakes you see because of the quality of the players. That is likely to mean fewer exciting, open games. But I believe that national-team football is very important. Football supporters want national teams, they want World Cups. TV figures prove it.

England have a very poor record in penalty shoot-outs at major tournaments. What can you do to improve that?
It won't happen through practice alone, we know that. We did enough practising at Euro 2012 and we still lost to Italy on penalties. There is a mental aspect and we are going to use Dr Steve Peters, a sports psychologist who has worked in many disciplines, including the successful British Olympic cycling team. We hope he will have a good effect on the players. There is no simple solution, that's the problem. If you're not careful you can make the issue more of a monster than it needs to be. One day we have to break the hoodoo, and when the hoodoo is broken suddenly you are back to a level playing field. But for every penalty shoot-out we don't win, it becomes a bigger and bigger monster. I'm keen that we improve in this area, but I'm also conscious of not making too much of it. There is an element of lottery in it. We are not doomed to fail in shoot-outs. We have the quality of players to score penalties if the situation arises.

If you could pick one player from another nation for your team, who would it be?
Lionel Messi. You would have to pick him. It would be a contest between him and Cristiano Ronaldo, the pair who have both been world player of the year in recent times. Both have exceptional ability to turn a game on its head, and they are the type who can be playing in a team which is having a bad day, and when they get the ball they make things happen. You could choose either. If it's just one, I'll choose Lionel Messi.

"There's no simple solution but I don't want to make the shoot-out issue more of a monster than it needs to be"

Will the World Cup in Brazil be the highlight of you career?
I am sure it will be. You can't tell until you've finished, of course. It will depend on how the tournament goes. Qualifying for it was a major high and something I am very proud of. I am really pleased to be there. It is a special honour to be there with your own country. It was exciting and enjoyable to take Switzerland to the 1994 World Cup, but this is England and I am English. It is an extra special feeling. It would be wrong to deny it.

You brought in Gary Neville as an assistant. How impressive has he been and does he have the makings of a top manager?
Definitely – as a coach and a manager. When he becomes a manager he'll be someone like myself who wants to work on the training ground as well as picking the team. He won't do it from afar. I would hope for football's sake that he does go down the route. Although once you get a job in that other lucrative and somewhat easier world of being a pundit, whether he'll want to take a chance to join the hordes of coaches and managers who live on a knife-edge every week, we'll see. You don't live on a knife-edge in a TV studio. You do that sitting on the bench at the side of the pitch. I think Gary will become a manager; he's such an incredible football enthusiast. He has brought another dimension to the England set-up because he has only just retired and had experiences of recent tournaments as a player. He has turned out to be everything we hoped he would be with his inquiring mind, his enthusiasm and detailed knowledge of the game.

Special...Hodgson feels Brazil will top his 1994 experience with Switzerland

Mental battle... sports psychologist Steve Peters has been brought in to help solve England's shoot-out conundrum

What's the mood like in the England camp ahead of the tournament?
It is very good. I saw that at the friendly match against Denmark in March. We chose 30 players for the squad and I wondered if it could be problematic but they were fantastic together. I thought there was a high degree of tension, the correct tension of the type that you want and expect before a big match. Afterwards, I knew that choosing 23 for the World Cup from that 30, plus one or two others who weren't there, would be harder than before. You could see the desperation among them all to go to Brazil. That was very encouraging.

Interview by Jim Holden

"You have to remember the last time we won a group match at the finals was in 2006"

DIDIER DESCHAMPS

You must be happy to be leading France at the World Cup given how close they came to missing out...
Of course. Everyone who was at the Stade de France for the return leg of the play-offs against Ukraine back in November felt they were part of something special. It was a very emotional night. We went into the two games thinking we were the stronger team and that we were going to qualify but ended up getting out of jail a little bit in the away leg. We could easily have lost 3-0 that night. Fortunately we put things right in the second game and made it through.

So is there a real buzz among French football fans right now?
Well lots of French supporters have booked their trips to Brazil, which is great. Who wouldn't be happy to be going to the World Cup? And maybe our supporters will be even happier going to Brazil, because as we all know it's one of the homes of football. But we'd like to make sure they have something to shout about when they're there.

Quite a few people are getting excited about the potential of this current French squad...
We've got a competitive team that's capable of doing some really good things. But on the other hand it's a team that has its weaknesses too. We can't pretend to be among the World Cup favourites because there are teams in this tournament that have a solid history behind them, who have been posting results that are way better than France's for four or five years now. The FIFA rankings show that, even if it's all relative. We won't really see what we're capable of in the tournament until June 15 when we play our opening game against Honduras.

You're in Group E with Ecuador, Honduras and Switzerland. That doesn't look like a particularly tough group, does it...
The objective is to win that first match against Honduras and then we'll see. I'm a realist, though that doesn't mean I don't have ambition. But we mustn't forget things that have happened in previous World Cups. Everyone said we had been drawn in an easy group in 2010 and we all know what happened there. You have to remember the last time we won in a group match at the World Cup Finals was against Togo in 2006. So we have to take it step by step.

Ever the realist...Deschamps knows France need to live up to their potential – unlike at recent World Cups

So what would you consider a good World Cup campaign to be?
That's a tough one to answer. On the other hand, everyone knows what a bad World Cup campaign looks like!

Karim Benzema didn't make the cut in 2010, but he's been in scintillating form for Real Madrid this season...
His efficiency in front of goal has been impressive in a team that's playing really well, but he's doing a lot of good things in his all-round game too. He looks sharp and his technique is good.

You must also be pleased to see his Real team mate Raphael Varane making a successful return after a troublesome knee injury...
Sure. Raphael is a young player who's already got a lot of good experience under his belt. He had a bad problem with his knee, but that's been dealt with now and it's great for him that he won't be hindered by a nagging injury. He's a big player who has played a big role up to now and will no doubt play a big one in the future.

Option...Benzema has been in fine form for Real Madrid

Are you concerned that Paul Pogba is said to be lethargic and disinterested sometimes while playing for Juventus?
Paul has enormous potential, but he's a young player. He's needed a bit of carrot and stick at different times. His coach at Juventus will deal with it and a player can always progress and learn from mistakes.

Do your players have what it takes to deal with a World Cup in Brazil?
Each World Cup has its own characteristics, for sure. But there's no pressure on us.

Interview by Howard Johnson

WORLD CUP PLAYING RECORD

1990	France failed to qualify
1994	France failed to qualify
1998	Captained France in six games as they won the World Cup

"It does you good to realise exceptional footballers aren't only found in Germany"

JOACHIM LOW

What did you make of Germany's most recent game, the friendly against Chile in March?
The Chileans were exactly the sort of opponent we needed in the run-up to the World Cup: extremely strong, hard-running and technically proficient. A team which really tested us. If you take the game as a whole, it was a relatively lucky win for us. Chile had lots of chances.

Was there a reason why they had so many goalscoring opportunities?
We gave the ball away a lot and because of that the game became too stretched, with too much space for Chile to operate in. In recent matches against England and Italy we excelled with our unbelievably accurate passing, but this time we were lacking in this department. We were never able to get a foothold in the game. Both teams set out early on to put the other under pressure. Even though we won the game 1-0, we only rarely made use of the space which opened up.

What did the team take from the game with regard to this summer?
We had to expend an incredible amount of effort. It does you good sometimes to realise that exceptional footballers aren't only found in Germany.

You have appealed to your players not to treat the World Cup finals with complacency. Did the Chile game confirm your warning?
In both my press conferences and in the dressing room with the players, I've brought up these issues. My opinion is that some players must raise their individual performance levels. Some have been injured and still have to find their match rhythm. We realise we must be in a position to improve. The players concerned have been informed.

Mesut Ozil started on the right side of midfield in the game against Chile and then moved to a more central striking role. Are you looking for a position for him? How does he seem to you at the moment?
I've had conversations with Mesut; we are always having exchanges of views. In leaving Spanish football for the Premier League he has had to get used to a different style of play. I don't have to create any role for him. I know which positions he can play in. In this game I wanted to see Ozil, [Miroslav] Klose and [Mario] Gotze switching positions. In the first half a couple of chances came out of it, but nothing in the second. I know what Mesut Ozil can do. I have 100 per cent faith that he will find his best form between now and the World Cup.

Options...Low knows the basis of his squad for Brazil, but still has concerns over whether some players will be ready in time

"I know what Mesut Ozil can do. I've 100 per cent faith he will find his best form between now and the World Cup"

What are your thoughts regarding Bastian Schweinsteiger?
He's important for us because of his class as a player, his experience and his immense influence on other players. If he's fit for 90 minutes, his strength in possession and tactical refinement makes him amazingly valuable. He has been out injured for a long time and has only been back for a couple of games. Over the next two or three months he needs to play more games and that will

BACK-ROOM STAFF

Kopke and Bierhoff won 129 caps between them, while Flick played over 100 league games for Bayern Munich

Hans-Dieter Flick (assistant coach)

Andreas Kopke (goalkeeping coach)

Oliver Bierhoff (business manager)

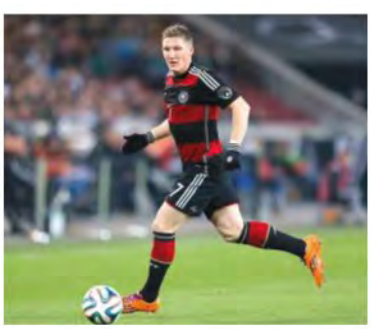
do him good. Then, I'm sure, we'll see a good Bastian Schweinsteiger.

Did the Chile game prove to you that the big football nations are not the only ones who can cause Germany problems at the World Cup?
Some experts see Chile as dark horses for the World Cup and they confirmed this standing against us. I watch a lot of international games and you can never say that the best footballers in the world are only located in Germany. We've some very good players – as long as they are in good physical shape. Sometimes one has the impression that Germany is flooded with talent, but other nations are not sleeping either.

How do you rate your side's chances this summer?
On paper, we have a top team, but reality sees it differently. We have some players who have been injured for months. We have some players who are not playing regularly for their clubs. We have some players who are struggling for form and others who are fighting little injury concerns.

Have you decided on your squad yet?
The clock is ticking and only those who hear it will have a real chance to be in the squad. This is an appeal to everybody, and to some a wake-up call. To go to the World Cup in top condition, everyone has to make sure that over the next few months their training, lifestyle and professionalism are just right.

Interview by Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung/ESM


Important...a fully fit Schweinsteiger will be vital

"I believe Ghana can win the World Cup"

JAMES KWESI APPIAH

After the benchmark set by the team at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, do you feel any pressure of having to at least reach the quarter-finals this time too?
I believe we've got quality players and the most important thing is how you prepare yourself and how you psyche the boys up for the tournament. I personally believe we can do much, much better than we did the last time.

But to do better would mean a minimum of getting to the semi-finals. Is that possible?
You never know! I believe that we've got the players. A good team is a team that has got a good bench, and at the moment we've also got a very good bench. That is the reason I think we can go very far, even taking the cup!

Do you feel Ghana represents Africa's best hope in Brazil?
I keep saying that I believe that African football has come of age and that many of the African countries are doing well at the moment. Although personally I believe in Ghana, I think the other African countries can also perform very well in this World Cup.

How happy are you about the return of Michael Essien and Kevin-Prince Boateng to the squad?
It is always good to have some experienced players in your team and the most important thing is making sure they are fully fit for the tournament. As everyone knows they both have a lot of experience and with them – and the youth around them – I believe we have a very good team.

Essien looked phenomenal for a player with hardly any game time on his return for Ghana, in October's World Cup qualifier against Egypt...
As I said earlier, I know that once you've got to a level, and you've got experience, the most important thing is making sure you are fully fit. And once you're fit, it all becomes so much easier.

What aspect of the Ghana side will surprise people this summer?
The one thing that I know of the Ghanaian players is that when we go to any tournament we've got that fighting spirit. We believe you never know what might happen and we make sure we fight to the bitter end and properly represent our country. Looking at the players we've got, I believe they can go far and that's why I keep saying that we may surprise the world.

For you personally, to coach on such a stage must be fantastic as not many African coaches have had the privilege...
When I went to the World Cup draw and I saw all the famous coaches around me, I felt really honoured. But I also feel part of them, not inferior to them. I feel I belong. It is an honour but also a challenge that I'm ready for.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Honour...Appiah will be one of the few Africans to have coached at the finals

Phenomenal...Essien (in white) returned to action against Egypt

"Anything's possible. No one thought Greece could get through the Euro 2012 group stage"

FERNANDO SANTOS

How do you assess Greece's draw in Brazil?
It's a very open group and this time I think that we, and everyone else in the group, is satisfied with the draw. It is a perfectly balanced group where anything can happen. You might give a slight edge to Colombia over the other group participants. What is important is to analyse and study our opponents as best we can and give 100 per cent of ourselves when we arrive in Brazil. Colombia are a very strong team and we know them very well. Ivory Coast are already very strong and experienced with Drogba, Yaya Toure and Gervinho, and Japan want to surprise on the world stage. But I believe we will impose ourselves and try to win.

How important are the older players in your squad?
The generation of 2004 is over. There are still two players – Karagounis and Katsouranis – around but they are not the same footballers anymore. Of course, their experience and their passion are a valuable guide for the youngsters, an example for them.

Do you anticipate any problems with the conditions in Brazil?
Not really. The roads may be a problem. If you get caught in traffic, it could be "bye bye!" Spending two hours on a bus is not good.

You've announced that you will step down after the World Cup...
It was a very difficult decision emotionally. Professionally I had made the decision some time ago but it was difficult for my heart to accept. This is because during my time in charge I have created strong bonds with many people, especially the president and the players whom I like very much and have close relationships with.

How will the players react?
I think that it can only have a positive impact on my players as I know them very well. They know that we will not continue together after the World Cup and they will try to give their best to end my tenure on a positive note.

Finale...Santos is standing down as national coach of Greece after the tournament in Brazil

"The roads may be a problem...if you get caught in traffic, spending two hours on a bus is not good"

So what is your target this summer?
I have a target which is for the team to make it past the group stage and I will do everything possible to achieve this goal.

Experience...Karagounis

How confident are you that you can achieve your goal?
We have three strong opponents, but everything is possible. In 2012 [at the [Euros], no one thought we could get through the group stage, especially after the first games. Who would have thought that we could beat Russia? I remember when they won their opening game 4-1, everyone said Russia would go on to win the European Championship. It might not look like it, but this is one of the most difficult groups because there are four teams with good chances to qualify.

What does the future hold for you?
I have not received any proposal from either a club or a national team. I will focus now on the World Cup and to give joy to the Greeks. Whether I go to China, Portugal or my cottage, this I will decide after the World Cup.

Interview by Goal News/ESM

"All the teams in our group may – and probably will – drop points"

LOUIS VAN GAAL

What are your thoughts on the draw?
It's a difficult and strong group. Starting with Spain will reveal immediately what we are capable of. Chile have a very strong team and they play the type of football I admire. Against Australia we have never won in the three previous matches, so it will be tough.

Is the game against Spain – which is a repeat of the last World Cup Final – already crucial?
Obviously it's a tough start. They are the world champions and had a solid qualifying campaign, conceding only three goals. However, a defeat doesn't mean that we are out. What matters is to survive this group, one way or another. And based on the strength of our opponents, all the teams may – and probably will – drop points.

Will the climatical conditions in Brazil and the distances between the cities be more relevant than in previous World Cups?
Absolutely. Before the draw the subject of conversation wasn't the possible opponents but the conditions. And that isn't a good sign. Fortunately, we don't start the tournament in the hottest part of the country and the distances to our locations aren't too far. We can manage from our base camp in Rio. That's important because less travelling time means a more speedy recovery after matches for players.

Focused...for the moment, Van Gaal only has the national team on his mind

Does that mean that you will use different criteria to normal when finalising your squad?
From the moment I was appointed I have declared that shape and fitness are the main criteria. I really think that, after a long and hard season, these things will make the difference in these conditions. It will matter even more than experience. There will probably be more youngsters than veterans in my squad.

Is that the reason why you test so many players? And will it remain uncertain until the deadline who goes to Brazil?
I wait so long because shape and fitness are things that come and go. Therefore many things can change up until the last minute. The same goes for the goalkeepers. I haven't decided yet who will be my number one and who will be his understudy. That also depends on how the opponents will play.

The Dutch FA has set the team a goal of reaching the semi-finals. Is that target realistic?
That's quite a goal! I've said before that eight or 10 teams are better. Look at the FIFA rankings and you notice that Holland have dropped out of the top 10. It indicates that we aren't the favourites. We have introduced a lot of fresh blood into the team and I estimated our chances at 20 per cent to reach the quarter-finals.

Who are your favourites for the title?
Brazil. I've seen them play at the Confederations Cup. They started slowly but were getting better and better. Playing on their own continent, being adjusted to the conditions and being cheered by a tremendous crowd all make them the favourites. Argentina, Germany and Spain could also be the new world champions.

You've said that you don't like the job of national coach. Why is that?
People asked me if I wanted to continue for two more years after the World Cup. I said no because I don't want to be dependent on the interests of clubs and their coaches. My goal was to coach at a World Cup once in my life. After Brazil that aim has been achieved.

So close...Arjen Robben in the 2010 Final

Any idea what you will do next?
No. If the right big club doesn't come along then I'll take a sabbatical. But right now my focus is entirely on the World Cup.

Interview by Klaas-Jan Droppert

BACKROOM STAFF

Van Gaal will be assisted by two former internationals who also played under him at Ajax

Danny Blind

Patrick Kluivert

"I realise few in the world know about Honduras as a football team"

LUIS FERNANDO SUAREZ

What would you consider to be a good World Cup for Honduras this summer?
I like to look at it both from a results perspective and also in terms of the quality of our game. Honduras have an immense desire to, in some way, improve on what they did in previous World Cups. So far it's been a great joy to have qualified. The biggest challenge today is to qualify for the next round. Beyond that, I couldn't say whether not getting through would be poor because we'd have to look at how we played. What I can say is that the Honduran people would be thrilled if the team got through to the next round.

Is there an advantage for you in playing against European teams in Latin America?
It depends where in Latin America because we won't have any kind of advantage against France in Porto Alegre at a time when it's cold and you don't feel the humidity so much. But we will have an advantage against Switzerland in Manaus, which is much more humid. So we have a bit of both, with the advantage more for France.

You trained Ecuador and took them to the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany, where you reached the knockout stage. Is it an advantage for you that they are in your group in Brazil?
I must have had about four or five of their current squad so what I know about them is almost the same as any other country.

Experience...Suarez will be taking a team to the World Cup for a second time

Are you happy with your chosen World Cup base?
Certainly. The place we chose is Puerto Feliz, which means "happy port", about two hours from Sao Paulo. It was a very easy decision. It was the first place of the 16 or 17 we visited and every time we made comparisons Puerto Feliz was the winner. It's a small city with a sports complex, with five training pitches, and the hotel will be ours exclusively so we can concentrate fully on football without distractions.

If you're second in the group you may face Argentina in the next stage...
It will be exactly the same as facing any other team at that stage. If you envisage us getting through then we're going to face very powerful teams. If what we're facing today is already very difficult – France, Switzerland and Ecuador – further ahead we'll face teams with a great tradition. I see getting through as the best opportunity to keep showing our progress. That's what Honduras is about. We have to be aware that for five or six years, maybe a little bit more, Honduras has been showing progress in its football and is well regarded for that in Central America. But I realise that in the world as a whole few know about Honduras as a football team, so it would be good for what has already been seen in Central America to be seen at the World Cup.

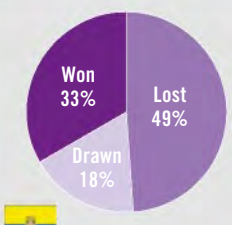
"For five or six years, maybe more, Honduras has been progressing and is well regarded in Central America"

Who do you think will win?
If there is one outright favourite it has to be Brazil – not only because they are at home, but also because of the climate, their game and their coach. Among the Europeans, I like Germany. If they used to be difficult, now their tactics and technique are more complete. If before they were good, now they are a much better team. I favour them.

You have been in charge of Honduras since 2011. Will you look to move on after the World Cup?
I signed until the end of the World Cup. I wouldn't have a problem working with another national team or a club. It will be down to evaluating the offers I get.

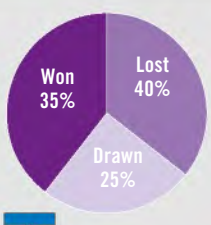
Interview by Rex Gowar

NATIONAL TEAMS MANAGED



Ecuador (2004-07)

P	W	D	L
51	17	9	25



Honduras (2011-present)

P	W	D	L
48	17	12	19

Past finals...in charge of Ecuador, against England, in 2006

"Iran is one of those countries where football is in the blood of the people"

CARLOS QUEIROZ

How easy did you find it to adapt to life in Iran and get the national side up to speed for World Cup qualification?
Easy really. With my experience I try to do the most important thing any coach can do and that is to adapt as soon as possible and understand the culture and the identity of the country where you are working. For me, doing this proved easy. I did not take long to be a part of their football family and start to get the best out of the players.

What is life like being the coach of a country like Iran?
I've enjoyed being the Iran coach a lot and one thing that you are going to learn in this World Cup is that Iran is not a fake country in terms of football. You don't need to promote football. Iran is one of those countries where football is in the DNA, the blood of the people, like it is in Brazil, Argentina or in Portugal. You don't need to promote the game here. The people live the game. It is one of the few countries in the world where you still see a stadium with more than 100,000 crammed in to watch a game. The night we qualified for the World Cup, we had 65million people on the streets celebrating. So you can see that you don't need to promote football in Iran.

How much time do you spend in Iran yourself?
Eighty to 90 per cent. Unless I'm on my travels with the national team, I'm there.

You will be the first team to play a game at the finals in the Curitiba stadium, which FIFA threatened might be in danger of not being ready. How does that impact on your preparations?
With my experience, I know what happened with the Euros in Portugal; in South Africa, Japan and Korea. It's always a part of the build-up package. There are always situations where things are not settled and there are always some concerns. But at the end of the day I knew our game in Curitiba would go ahead. There was no way they would lose the right to host a World Cup game. OK, there are a couple of problems, for sure, but, with due respect, 50 per cent of it is media hype.

Success...Queiroz celebrates reaching the World Cup finals with a 1-0 victory away to South Korea last June

What will be your ambitions in Brazil this summer?
Iran has never reached the second stage of a World Cup so our mission is to do everything in our power to make that happen. There are people who think that we are going to Brazil just to participate, or have a holiday, or even to be a punchbag [for the other teams in the group]. I know that before the final draw there were 31 teams who wanted Iran to be in their group. Our goal now is to make them sorry that they thought that way.

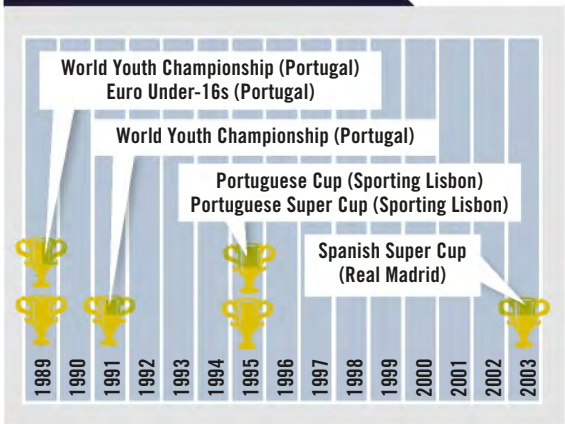
You start against Nigeria and then play Argentina and Bosnia. What are your thoughts about your group?
We are concentrating on the Nigeria match, then we will think about Argentina. For us, Nigeria means the World Cup. The Nigeria match means everything for us. We will do our best in the 2014 World Cup to bring pride and dignity to Iran.

And what will you do when the World Cup is over?
For me personally it would be a great honour to extend my contract. My personal belief is that Iran's current potential is very high and Iranian football resembles a sleeping giant that is faced with the challenge of waking from this sleep. Football is in the blood and hearts of the people and it is unfortunate that only 20 per cent of this potential has been reached.

Fanatical...Iran supporters

Interview by Mark Gleeson

TROPHIES WON AS A COACH



“The day Mario Balotelli realises his full potential will be a happy day for Italy”

CESARE PRANDELLI

You were in Brazil last summer for the Confederations Cup. What was your impression of the country and its readiness for the World Cup?
The impression I got was that we're going to a country where there will be a huge involvement in the World Cup. It is such a big country that I am not sure if they are able to get everything right and ready: proper preparations for the supporters, travel arrangements, the stadia, and so on. I hope they do, but I will say one thing: in Brazil you will get the fans on your side if your team plays good football.

Are you worried about a repeat of the street protests that occurred during the Confederations Cup?
The protests were very civil, there were lots of people in the streets, lots of young people, but you have got to listen to people like this, it's no good just criticising them. Their motivations for protesting seem to me to have been legitimate. I would say that we run the risk of further protests during the finals. One of the first things you notice about Brazil is there is too big a gulf between the “haves” and the “have nots”. And where you have that level of difference there are going to be tensions.

Return...Prandelli knows what to expect, having led Italy in Brazil last summer

“There will be climatic problems in Brazil...I suggest we have two time-outs so that players can drink”

In February, FIFA's chief medical officer accepted, in principle, your call for water breaks during matches at this summer's tournament. Was that call based on your experience at the Confederations Cup?
Yes indeed. There are going to be climatic problems in Brazil. We encountered them last summer. I mean, the heat and humidity in certain venues will be worrying and that's why we asked FIFA for water breaks. If we want the best from the players then I suggest that we have two time-outs of two minutes in either half of the game so that players can drink.

Italy's opening game against England involves a 6,000km, four-hours-each-way flight to Manaus. Will travelling be a problem in Brazil?
That was certainly a problem that we encountered last summer. The travelling, the long hours on internal flights, that is something that stops you both from training and from really resting. And then you have to play another game three or four days later. Sure, that will be a problem.

Italy had a very positive 2013, so what are your expectations for this year?
Last year was a very good year, very positive. We qualified for the finals with two games still to play, something that Italy had never done before. I think a lot of people would say too that our best game was that semi-final against Spain [in the Confederations Cup]. In the second half of that game, Spain were not dominant, we gave them a lot of difficulty, but our second half against Brazil was also very good. All that might suggest that we will do well but, in reality, right now all we can do is attempt to hold our own with the strongest teams in the world. Sometimes we manage to do so partly because we prepare really well and because we turn up knowing that it's going to be difficult.

What do you make of your first-round draw?
This is a tough first-round group with three former World Cup winners in it [England, Italy and Uruguay]. But our tradition is that if we're in a difficult group then we go to the tournament in the right frame of mind, mentally prepared. Whereas, if the group is what people like to call “easy”, then we have all sorts of problems. That is simply the history of Italian football. We are not afraid of any of the teams but it is still a very difficult group. Our minimum requirement is to qualify for the next round, ideally by winning the group. When we played England at the European Championship last year we played brilliantly but we didn't score and went through only on penalties. Likewise, Uruguay gave us a lot of problems in the second half of our third-place game at the Confederations Cup and again we only won on penalties. Nobody is talking about Costa Rica but I have had a look at them and they have plenty of technique

TROPHIES WON AS A PLAYER

as well as a strong physical presence.

What about the host team, Brazil. Do you think they will be able to handle the pressure?
In my view, Brazil is a team that can decide its own fate. In other words, winning or losing this World Cup depends on them. Looking at the way they prepared for the Confederations Cup it was obvious that they had given [coach Luiz Felipe] Scolari time to organise a serious preparation. Likewise, they will have something like 45 days

Special...Balotelli is a player "of terrific quality"

to prepare for the World Cup, while we will only have about two weeks. Brazil have been programmed for victory in this tournament.

What about Mario Balotelli? Which Balotelli will turn up in Brazil: the brilliant footballer or the controversial superstar?
Look, let me tell you a joke that Roberto Mancini tells about Balotelli. He was once asked if Balotelli needed the help of a psychologist. No, no, he answered, it is his team manager who needs the psychologist. What I have to say, and I've said it before, is that Mario, with us, with the national team, has always behaved well, he's never done anything especially strange or eccentric. Sure, he's a very special lad who goes his own way, but fundamentally he is a sensitive lad and a 100 per cent Italian footballer of terrific quality. The day that he realises his full potential will be a happy day both for Milan and for Italy. Let us hope that day comes in Brazil.

Interview by Paddy Agnew

"To reach the knockout stage would be a perfect result"

SABRI LAMOUCHI

Satisfaction...Lamouchi can take great pride in leading Ivory Coast to Brazil

Did you change your approach after the disappointment of last year's African Nations Cup – in which Ivory Coast went out in the quarter-finals – because the team looked slick again in the World Cup qualifiers?
We made some changes to the squad so that the group could evolve and we could achieve the best results to ensure we qualified for the World Cup in Brazil. We did not lose a match in the qualifiers. It was not something easy to do, but we overcame the difficult challenges and now we work to the next goal.

Big factor...Drogba

How does it feel to be a World Cup coach after just two years in your first job?
Sure, it's fantastic. It's true I only started my experience 18 months ago with the "Elephants", but today I've the experience already of a tournament situation at the African Nations Cup finals that I can take to the World Cup. It is a source of great satisfaction that I've been able to add to the honours and the pride of the Ivorians.

Didier Drogba is the international image of Ivory Coast but, at this late stage of his career, what does he mean to your team?
It's not complicated. Didier Drogba propels Ivorian football and the Ivory Coast team. He is an icon, not only in Abidjan and elsewhere in the Ivory Coast but also across Africa. He is a great player, a good man, a very intelligent person. He's a good professional who contributes his part of the collective. He can be a big factor.

Is this World Cup the stage for him to sign off in style?
For sure, the World Cup is going to be his last and he'll want to achieve. For him it will be his last; for others it will be their first. For Ivory Coast it is the third time to be at the World Cup and for this third adventure there is a sense that nothing is impossible.

Gervinho has had a good season at Roma, while others such as Wilfried Bony have won contracts in the Premier League. These must be positives for you...
Yes, it is a big fillip for the team. They are playing at a high level and will be in good physical shape. It makes for more competitiveness in the squad but it also ensures you have players at the peak of their performance. The intensity of the game in England means that the players will be sharp when they join the squad for the World Cup.

What would be a success for Ivory Coast at the finals?
For us to get out of the group stage is an objective. Ivory Coast have not done this before, so that would be a perfect result for us. After that, once you are in the knockout rounds, there is a feeling that all is possible. We are preparing to play as best we can at the World Cup.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

YOUNGEST COACHES AT BRAZIL 2014

Sabri LAMOUCHI (IvC)	42yrs
Niko KOVAC (Cro)	42
Paulo BENTO (Por)	44
Marc WILMOTS (Blg)	45
HONG Myung-bo (SKo)	45
Didier DESCHAMPS (Fra)	45

And the oldest coach at this summer's finals is...

Oscar TABAREZ (Uru)	67

The old man... Uruguay's Tabarez (below) has 25 years on Lamouchi

"Japan must learn from its mistakes"

ALBERTO ZACCHERONI

Are preparations going well?
Yes, extremely well. We have been preparing for this for the past four years and it is now a question of drawing all of those preparations together in time for the World Cup. I think that work is advancing extremely well.

How would you describe your team?
In a word, I'd say this team is attractive. Of course, these are things that must be judged by others, but in my eyes this is an exciting team, the sort of team that's going to produce the unexpected and people will enjoy seeing. Most teams have a single style and do a certain limited range of things, but Japan has more variety.

What do you see as your strengths?
There are several things that I would describe as strong points in my own mind, but I think the key is for us to play our way positively without adjusting to our opponents.

And weaknesses?
A lack of international-level experience.

What positive surprises have you had in the past four years?
The best positive surprise has been the high quality of Japanese football. I have been feeling this more and more, from day to day. Also, the young players have grown more than I'd expected. It's easy for me to find positive surprises. I'm this team's biggest fan.

Big fan...Zaccheroni says Japan's young players have impressed him

How many of the 23 players have you decided on already?
I can't say any definite figure but obviously the players who have played the most so far have the best chance of going to the World Cup. Injury is the biggest risk factor for them but there is also the very real possibility that some will suffer a drop in form or some other fast-improving player will come through.

You are known for playing 3-4-3, but with Japan you prefer 4-2-3-1. Of course, you have tried other formations in Japan, but why do you keep on coming back to that one?
The reason is that so very few teams around the world play my kind of 3-4-3, so the players aren't familiar with it. You don't get enough time with a national team to do things the players don't normally do. There simply isn't the time to explain the merits of the 3-4-3. That is the main reason why I've refrained from using it here.

What did Japan learn from last year's Confederations Cup in Brazil?
We didn't get any points from the games but all three were an extremely valuable experience and we learned a lot. I do believe the team has grown through that experience. A child who never falls, never learns how to fall. Against Italy, we didn't win because of that inexperience. Italy is a team that takes maximum advantage from a handful of chances, so we had to manage the game better, keep the ball and minimise their opportunities. Italy's goals were more about our mistakes than their quality.

If you were to select one game where Japan got it all right, which one would it be?
If I have to choose one, I'd say our home game with Jordan during World Cup qualification. The difference between the Jordan and Italy games was that we kept on playing exactly the way we wanted from start to finish against Jordan. Against Italy, after taking the lead, we started thinking too much about Italy's quality. In football, if you start thinking too much about your opponent and become afraid, you lose 50 per cent of your own form. You have to respect your opponents but not fear them.

How do you feel about your group opponents this summer?
Overall, I think it is a rather balanced group but Colombia stand out for the quality of their players. Looking at their bench, too, they have a lot of players who can change the flow of the game.

And Ivory Coast and Greece...
I think it will probably be a very open game against Ivory Coast and a battle with Greece, because Greece are used to battling hard. I expect that we'll have to be tough as well.

Do you have any tangible target?
The goal is to bring the team to the World Cup in the best possible condition and present an attractive team. I don't want to place a limit on how far we do or don't go. The important thing is to focus on each game as it comes.

What does this World Cup mean to you personally?
This has all been a wonderful experience for me, to manage a national team and gain this international experience.

Interview by Mike Plastow

CAREER HIGHS

TEAM COACHED		TROPHIES WON
Udinese	(1995-98)	
Milan	(1998-2001)	1999 Serie A
Lazio	(2001-02)	
Internazionale	(2003-04)	
Torino	(2006-07)	
Juventus	(2010)	
Japan	(2010-present)	2011 Asian Cup
		2013 East Asian Cup

"I'll call up the players best suited for the job. But I need them to have football rhythm"

MIGUEL HERRERA

What is your assessment of Mexico's situation ahead of the World Cup?
I think we are doing alright. We have had very little time since I took the helm and we are battling against time, so some hiccups are to be expected. I'm not saying that as an excuse, it's the situation that I inherited and I don't run away from it. We are testing players on the fly now and helping them adjust to what I want, but I think we will be ready once the time comes.

You talk a lot about your system. Is it hard to assimilate for players that haven't played under you before?
It's not that. Sometimes, in a national team you only have a few hours with your players before you play a game. It's very difficult to implement a system under those conditions. Once I choose my final squad, I will have more time to work with them and the team will be more solid.

What percentage of that squad do you think you have at the moment?
I don't like to talk about percentages or say something like "seventy or eighty per cent". In my head I already have my 23 players, but I have to keep watching games, because those who are good today might not be in one month. And there's also injuries. I hope nothing happens but it's not uncommon at all so I have to have a lot more players in mind.

During your stint, you have taken some controversial decisions, such as deciding to leave out your European-based stars...
I recalled them against Nigeria and I really liked their attitude and their commitment to the team so they are very much back in the fold. I will call up the players I consider to be best suited for the job, but I need them to have football rhythm.

Limited...Herrera has only had half a dozen games in charge of Mexico

"The European-based players are very much back in the fold"

At the moment, what do you think Mexico have to improve on the most before the finals?
We still have to work on our conditioning and tactical discipline. We know the quality of the opposition we will face in Brazil and we need to be able to play with the same intensity during the whole game and not lose our minds if we fall one goal behind. I think we will get to the point I want once I can work with the full squad.

On a personal note, you don't shy away from the media and have a huge presence in social networks. Why is that?
I don't know. I've always been like that, why would I change because I'm in charge of "*El Tri*" now? I like to be open and talk to people, to the media. I have nothing to hide. If I tried to avoid it I would not be honest with myself, so I will keep doing it.

You are also prone to emotional outbursts. Do you consider yourself more a motivator or a tactical-oriented coach?
I think that on the pitch you have to react both emotionally and tactically. For example, in a recent friendly against the US, at half-time, I had to tell my players we needed *huevos* (guts), because we were not rising to the occasion, and they reacted. But, obviously, I also made tactical adjustments to keep the ball better and to build our attacking game, which was non-existent in the first half. In the end it worked and we managed to pull two goals back. I think the best way to lead is by combining these two factors.

You recently declared that you believed Mexico could win the World Cup, was it a motivational ploy?
In a World Cup, any of the 32 teams can be champions. We are one of them. We have good players, great determination and also a great infrastructure for our preparation, which is an issue that is little mentioned but it is very important. I think the conditions are there to have a great tournament. Mexico have already won titles in Under-17 World Cup and Olympic Games recently. Why not us?

Interview by Martin Del Palacio Langer

Gold...Mexico won the 2012 Olympic Games

INTERNATIONAL APPEARANCES...

As a player	
Mexico	14 games/0 goals
As a coach	
Mexico	6 games

"I'm still learning my trade as Nigeria coach"

STEPHEN KESHI

Before you won the 2013 African Nations Cup you made it clear you had chosen a young squad with the 2018 World Cup in mind. So is this Nigeria side now one for Brazil 2014 or still for 2018?
Sure, sure. I'm still in the process of building. If tomorrow I happen to see another high-quality, top-class player, I'll bring him in right away, so I'll never stop building. But I've only been in this job for the last two years and it is not like I have been with these players all the time. I only get to work with them periodically when we have the international games.

Have you gambled on this young crop of Nigerians by discarding some of the more established players?
I don't think so. I don't consider myself as someone who takes a gamble with players. Before I put a player on the pitch I know what he can do, I know his confidence level, I know how prepared he has been. Other people might see it as a risk because they are unknown names with no experience, but I have worked with those players for a period of time, I know what they can do and I have belief in them.

What do you look for when scouting these unheralded players that you have introduced into the team?
I try to look for intelligence, which for me is the key. When you have that intelligence, your decision-making is so much better. I also like the player to have that fire burning in him, that thing of "I don't want to lose". If I can have characters like that, then I'm good to go. If I can get them to have a winning mentality then they'll enjoy their game. I want them to enjoy playing but to be a winner too. If you can have a combination of passion and winning, everything becomes a lot better.

No panic...Keshi says he is unfazed by the high expectations of the Nigerian public

"There's a small community trying to make sure we don't function well, but we treat them like they don't exist"

Is there pressure on you and Nigeria to do well in Brazil because you are African champions?
I'm still learning this trade. I'm still young in this trade. I'm thankful for what I have achieved. But when people talk about stress or about how I don't feel the pressure, all I can say is that in this game there are three things that will happen. It's either you win, lose or draw. Whatever happens, you just have to welcome it and move on. It's true everybody is now focusing a lot on us – there is always a lot of expectation from Nigerian people – but there is no panic. All I have to do is concentrate on my work and my players and that's it.

Did the Nations Cup success come too early?
No, no, that was our game plan anyway, but we were not loud. We concentrated on every game that came our way. Winning the cup was a dream come true.

Victor Anichebe of West Bromwich Albion is one of several Nigerian players who are yet to make up their minds about playing for the "Super Eagles"...
You need to understand the dilemma of the players and their clubs. I was a player in Belgium and France, I know how it goes in Europe. The common thing is to understand your players and the relationships with their clubs. In all the teams that I've coached I've never really had a problem between the players and their clubs because I try to find some leeway. You've got to look for an understanding to make it go well. I've not had problems. I know my players, they want to play for me and at the same time they want to play for their clubs, so we have to find a balance that works for everybody.

NATIONAL TEAMS COACHED

Togo	2004-06
Togo	2007-08
Mali	2008-10
Togo	2011
Nigeria	2011-present

"Ronaldo is a great player but I worry about the whole team"

PAULO BENTO

Being Nigeria coach sometimes seems to be a nightmare job, with everyone trying to scythe you down. You seem to put up with it. Why?
It's like that in Nigeria but I'm not bothered with it. I do my thing. But it's not all Nigerians that do that, it's a small community of people trying to dismantle the team, poison it, make sure it doesn't function well. But we all know them and we treat them like they don't exist and just keep moving forward.

But it must frustrate you, with all that energy you have to waste with all these unnecessary shenanigans...
Not really, if you know them. I've known them as a player and now coach. They don't count.

What kind of football will Nigeria play at the World Cup?
When I was a player I liked an offensive style. I like people to come to the stadium and enjoy the way my team is playing; intelligent play, having fun. I want my players not to worry about "do or die" but to have fun with a purpose.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

African kings...Emmanuel Emenike lifts the trophy

Ready...but Bento knows Germany will be favourites to win the group

Why did you choose Campinas, in south-easten Brazil, as Portugal's World Cup base?
For several reasons, ranging from the logistics, the hotel facilities and the training-camp conditions. We are very happy with it. We have been very well received in Campinas, as indeed has been the case everywhere in Brazil. Now it's up to us, the coaching and medical staff, to manage the fitness levels both in physical and psychological terms, in order to prepare for the finals.

What of your group opponents?
Germany will be no different from their 2012 team. They are an extremely stable team with a well-defined game plan. They always show great mental strength in tournaments. The United States do not bring happy memories for us. They are also physically strong and well organised. As for Ghana, we can't forget that in the last World Cup they only missed out on the semi-finals by a whisker. Alongside Ivory Coast, they are the best African team.

Portugal's key man... Bento is delighted to have a player of Ronaldo's magnitude

What is your ambition for the group?
Just like in any other group: to qualify for the knockout stage, trying to accumulate as many points as possible. Germany are one of the favourites to win the whole thing and can be considered favourites in our group, but it's not a given. We will fight with the conviction that we can reach the last 16 – and if we do so by finishing top all the better.

How important is Cristiano Ronaldo for Portugal?
I believe justice was done when he won the Ballon d'Or given the output in an extraordinary year by an extraordinary player, with a tremendous talent and the utmost professionalism. Only as such can you win this prize. He's the first Portuguese to win it twice and I'm delighted as the national team coach to have him. I am extremely proud that Portugal can count on a player of this magnitude. Ronaldo is a great player, a huge name in world football, but I have to worry about the whole team. I'll be working with a 23-man squad, and not just one player, but of course Ronaldo is very important for us. He is in great form and like all the other players will look to stay at the top of his game.

Will Ronaldo be a lone striker in the Portugal line-up?
Using Ronaldo as our only striker from the start is not the best option given his characteristics. At certain moments, and depending on the match situation, he has played this role, like against Sweden and Russia [in the qualifiers]. The other possibility is to play him up front alongside another forward. We have time to think about that. But he won't play as the lone striker from the start.

Interview by A Bola/ESM

INTERNATIONAL APPEARANCES

As a player:	
Portugal	35 caps/0 goals
As a coach:	
Portugal	40 games

World Cup Coaches
RUSSIA

"England were tired...I hope Russia are fresh"

FABIO CAPELLO

Who are your favourites to win the World Cup?
Brazil is my favourite team because I saw the games they played in the Confederations Cup. They improved a lot, game after game, and they are really strong. The quality is not the top like normal Brazilian players, but they are compact and they are physically strong. After Brazil I think in terms of quality comes Argentina. Messi always makes the difference. The surprise could be Colombia. I don't know if Uruguay, with Cavani and Suarez, will be a really dangerous team. After this, in Europe it's Spain, the World Cup champions. It's really important in what physical condition the teams arrive at the World Cup. England are always tired because they play too many games. I hope Russia will arrive fresh.

With Russia hosting the next World Cup, what is your focus? Is it hard to keep the balance between 2014 and 2018?
We are back in the World Cup after 12 years, so the experience is really important for the players. The expectation for the World Cup in 2018 is really big. We need to build 12 new stadiums, infrastructure, everything. That will be a big job.

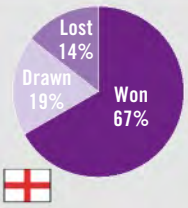
You mentioned England. You received a lot of criticism around the team camp during the last World Cup. Do you think the criticism was fair?
No. The camp was perfect. When you win, everything is ok; when you lose, everything is wrong. This is the story of football. But all the people said it was the best camp you could find in South Africa. We didn't play really well – also the ref made a big mistake – but the camp was great.

Is there anything that you learned in South Africa that you will take with you to this World Cup in charge of Russia?
I went to Brazil looking for a camp and we were lucky because we were second on their list for where we will stay now, after Germany. It all changed because they built a new camp especially for Germany. We are really lucky because it's one of the best camps in terms of location, distance from the airport, everything. We are really happy.

Interview by Amanda Davies/CNN

Content...Capello is happy with his base

OTHER NATIONAL TEAMS COACHED



England (2007-12)

P	W	D	L
42	28	8	6

Russia (2012-present)

P	W	D	L
17	10	5	2

World Cup Coaches
SOUTH KOREA

"South Korea has nothing to be scared of"

HONG MYUNG-BO

Confident...Hong (centre) won't be drawn over his target in Brazil this summer

How are your preparations for Brazil 2014 going?
We have been preparing well and have more preparations to come. We have been working very hard and will take confidence from the work we have done. Everyone is working together towards the same goal of doing as well as we possibly can at the World Cup. Do I have my own personal goal of how far I want to go at the World Cup? I have a target but it is too early to say. Little by little we are getting ready.

How do you feel about your group draw?
Of course, all three games in the group stage are important and will be tough, but I feel that the most important is the opening match against Russia. The result we get from that game will have a major influence of the games against Algeria and Belgium. That game will determine the flow of the group.

How would you describe the current state of the South Korean side?
For me, the most important thing is to have confidence, both individually and as a team. There should be no fear. In the remaining time we have left we have to use the time wisely, and we have to help our young players believe in themselves. Korean football has shown over the years that it can achieve great things and that there is nothing to be scared of.

Who are your favourites to win the World Cup?
I guess Brazil will win. Europe may be the centre of world football but the players will be a little tired and that will be true of many of our players too after a long season. Playing in South America is a new experience for us and that is why we spent a few days there in January in a training camp for our domestic players. It gave us an idea of what to expect.

Do you ever wish for a quiet life away from football?
My life is a football life. I am the national team coach of South Korea and the representative of the country's football and that puts me in a prominent position. There are times though that I miss an ordinary life. Before I became national coach I was a father and a husband. I am the head of a family but there have been many times when I have been unable to fulfil that role.

Interview by John Duerden

NEXT MONTH

World Soccer

WORLD CUP SPECIAL

BRAZIL 2014: THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO THE 32 TEAMS

156 pages of expert analysis

SUMMER ISSUE ON SALE **MAY 9**

"Compliments are dangerous – Spain don't like the word 'favourites'"

VICENTE DEL BOSQUE

Luiz Felipe Scolari recently said that Brazil were the best team because they have won the most World Cups. Do you agree with the Brazil coach?
We are the opposite, we don't brag about anything. It is good for him to say these things, it keeps us alert. Compliments are always dangerous. "Favourite" is a word we don't like.

Are you concerned about the timetable for the Champions League, with three Spanish sides in the quarter-finals?
I really hope that the Final is between two Spanish teams. It would be a great sign. I look at the squads and all of our players are getting plenty of playing time, but no players are playing all the time. The big thing is that we have lots of alternatives. The players also have the excitement of a World Cup to motivate them.

Are you planning, like you did in 2012, to have a longer squad list from which players can be dropped?
No. We will be watching that date of May 24 [Champions League Final], but after the semi-finals we will know a lot more and where we need to go. There will still be time for people to try to make the 23.

Confident...Del Bosque is happy with the fitness of all his big names

So we could get a situation like Pedro breaking into the squad before the World Cup in 2010...
I think not. They are different situations and types of players. It is a different case with young players like Jese [who is now out injured]. There are 16 or 17 players who are in a similar situation. But we will be watching.

"The difference between the top three and the rest of La Liga is terrible...the economics are unavoidable"

Among those who might get the nod is Thiago Alcantara. Has he reached the level of maturity required?
Yes, he is a guy who is having many more minutes at a big club like Bayern Munich. In the future it's clear we will have many more players like him.

And what about Raul Garcia?
He's another one. Every Monday we review the list one by one. It is not a fixed group, some have been added, others have been dropped, but Raul is there.

In 2010 you had to make some painful decisions. Is that going to happen again?
We will take a decision that will be hard on whoever it affects. We have 43 or 44 players [under consideration] and some will be left out. Some are going to be very sure of their places and others will believe they should be there, but there are only 23 places.

What will Diego Costa bring to the Spain team?
Good determination. This is a guy who makes life uncomfortable for opponents, who does not give up a lost ball, who dominates in the air, who has the speed. He has many qualities, but I haven't announced the final squad yet...

Much has been made of the physical condition of Xavi this season. Are you concerned about this?
I have to trust what I see on the pitch and not what can happen in four months. Right now I do not see anyone missing out because of fitness. Xabi Alonso, Xavi, David Villa...all are playing. Fernando Torres and Villa have missed games because of injury, but the rest are playing for very important teams. At the moment I can't see anything that will stop someone being called up.

What do you think about the facilities at your base in Curitiba?
We are very happy with what we have seen. Miguel Angel Portugal, [a former Real Madrid team-mate] is now coaching Atletico Paranaense and he will help make things easier. The training pitches are perfect. It all looks good.

How do you see this season's Spanish title race?
We all wanted this close race, although it is true that the difference between the top three and the rest is terrible. It happens in all leagues, the economics of the situation are unavoidable.

Are you worried about the Spanish Cup Final between Madrid and Barcelona after the fiesty affair when they met in the 2011 Final?
No. And hopefully we will also have the Champions League Final between two Spanish teams. That would be good for the team.

Interview by Miguel Angel Lara/ESM

FROM THE PAST

Although Del Bosque has made his name as one of the world's most respected and successful coaches, he was also a decent player.

A defensive midfielder with Real Madrid, he made over 300 league appearances for the club, winning La Liga five times and the Spanish Cup on four occasions. He also played in the 1981 European Cup Final against Liverpool and was capped 18 times, scoring one goal.

He appeared at Euro 80 as part of a Spain side that failed to win a game and finished bottom of their group.

"Without immigrants, Switzerland would not have a team"

OTTMAR HITZFELD

What is a realistic target for your team this summer?
The first aim we have set ourselves is to get past the group stage, after that there are no limits. We are not saying it is our duty to get to the quarter-finals or semi-finals; it would be a great achievement in Brazil to reach the round of 16. In South Africa, we were good defensively, now we have a better team technically. It's good to have young players who are confident and believe they can pull off a shock.

How do you rate your opponents?
Ecuador are a physically strong, combative team with some technically good players. In my view, France are certainly the group favourites as they have obtained very good results in the last two or three years and have a wealth of players to choose from. We know Honduras from four years ago and they have an advantage of playing us in Manaus in 30 degree temperatures and 95 per cent humidity.

How difficult will it be to play in a tropical climate?
It's no coincidence that no European team has ever won a World Cup in South America. We must improvise, we need patience, we need strong nerves. We also play in Brasilia, at 1,200 metres above sea level, in a very dry climate, and that is another difference for us. All teams who play in Manaus will have to think about their tactics. You can't play a pressing game in Manaus. I think the teams will naturally try and adapt. You have to find the right rhythm for the 90 minutes. It might just be a question of who has more gas at the end.

Do you think coaches should have a voice when organisers decide when and where matches will be played?
No, that is something FIFA decides. FIFA has a technical committee who discuss these things but what ultimately decides are the financial aspects and the host nation. We are just participants.

You have been involved in football for 45 years as a player and coach.

Influence...Hitzfeld has helped integrate foreign-born players into the side

Have things changed for the better or the worse over that time?
Football has a great social duty, football shines across the world. So many people play football and through it you can teach respect and fair play, and its rules can be applied to life. Football has a lot of positive things. It is the same as it ever was, but what has changed is that money plays a decisive role.

You were offered a two-year contract to continue after the World Cup. Why did you turn it down?
I am 65, I have been coach of Switzerland for six years, and that is a long time. I want to live without the pressure. I've had it for a long time and it's been great, but now, after this World Cup, which is a highlight, it's enough.

Swiss football has also done a good job at integrating immigrants...
Twenty per cent of the Swiss population are immigrants and over half of our team. Without immigrants, we would not have a team. For me, the most important thing is to get respect. Everyone is important; the team must come first. I have made a Turkish player, Gokhan Inler, captain of the national team for the integration of foreign-born players. As a coach you can influence people.

Only three players from the under-17 world champions are now in the senior squad. Why is that?
The biggest problem is that a lot of players go abroad too early and they don't make the grade abroad. Then they become reserve-team players and can't develop further. The logical development is that the players remain in Switzerland, play in the Super League, then the national team and then move abroad. We have tried to talk to them and told them to stay longer in Switzerland, but when they get an offer and it's five or 10 times as much as they would get here you cannot stop them.

How do you feel about players who train in Switzerland but then go and play for another national team?
Those are FIFA regulations. It would be better to say that you can only change country until you are 18, or that when you have been developed by a national federation then you must from then on play for that country. It can't be right the players represent Switzerland with the age-level teams and then go to another country. FIFA must change that.

Interview by Brian Homewood

TROPHIES WON

AARAU
Swiss Cup 1985

GRASSHOPPERS
Swiss Super Cup 1989, Swiss Cup 1989, Swiss league 1990, Swiss Cup 1990, Swiss league 1991

BORUSSIA DORTMUND
German Super Cup 1995, Bundesliga 1995, German Super Cup 1996, Bundesliga 1996, Champions League 1997

BAYERN MUNICH
German League Cup 1998, German League Cup 1999, Bundesliga 1999, German League Cup 2000, Bundesliga 2000, German Cup 2000, Bundesliga 2001, Champions League 2001, Intercontinental Cup 2001, Bundesliga 2003, German Cup 2003, German League Cup 2007, Bundesliga 2008, German Cup 2008

"Uruguay don't have many options. When things work, you reaffirm them"

OSCAR TABAREZ

What are the dangers posed in your group by Costa Rica, England and Italy?
Often, when analysing teams before competitions, one looks at their history, what they've achieved, but not so much at their form going into the World Cup. Then we'll know which players are in their squads, the warm-up matches they have played, in what shape they're going to arrive at the World Cup. Costa Rica have a distinct style: skill, good fitness and they're quick. We faced them in the play-off for the last World Cup and they posed us a lot of problems. They were even matches, which is what has always happened with us, but we've also shown over these last few years that no team is out of our reach.

Is Group D a "group of death"?
We weren't hoping for an easy group because that's never the case for us and I remember in South Africa, there was talk of "groups of death". We had already been given the last rites, with many people saying "they're already finished". Well, we won the group. The fact we have to meet good teams with a rich past – especially Italy as four times champions, with a great football tradition, just like England whose players are in a very demanding league – all this suggests we must be very well prepared. But that also increases one's motivation.

You suffered a slump between September 2012 and March 2013, taking only two points out of 18 in the qualifiers, and looked like you might miss out...
We have a great feeling of relief which we are already shaking off because our happiness at qualifying had a lot to do with how difficult it was for us, especially in 2012. But that match we won in Venezuela [June 2013], when we turned things round, meant we could go to the Confederations Cup and play against elite teams that will be at the World Cup, renewing aspects of our team that we'd lost some time back. And I maintain that the team Brazil found it hardest to beat was Uruguay. They won the Final [against Spain] with more ease than they beat Uruguay. And our match with Italy and against Nigeria, which wasn't easy, showed that the motivation levels of this team grow.

Plan...Tabarez believes that solid defence is a platform for attacking success

Does reaching the semi-finals in 2010 make you better prepared for this tournament?
The opening match at a World Cup bears no comparison with the qualifiers, it's quite different. [In South Africa] we played against France and I'm not saying that was our weakest [match], but we showed more in the following matches once we had that previous experience [under our belts]. We don't have that experience now so we need to be well prepared to overcome the uncertainties that always arise in a debut match when there is no specific prior experience.

Playing the Confederations Cup in Brazil last year will have helped...
It's no small matter that winning the Copa America [in Argentina in 2011] gave us the chance to be in some parts of Brazil and see aspects of the organisation. Some things worked well, like transporting teams to places where they were going to compete which was excellent. I suppose during the World Cup it will be the same or even better.

Much of your squad remains from 2010, but those players are four years older. Has it been difficult to bring in new blood?
Uruguayan football doesn't have enough players of top standard to have several national teams. In recent matches we've brought in some younger players, such as Emiliano Velazquez, Gaston Silva and Jose Maria Gimenez, who did very well.

Is there a danger the team might be too dependent on Luis Suarez?
Well, it is, as it is of all the players with great potential which they put to the team's service. Every time he came here he's achieved something new, so who's to say he can't rise to another challenge and do his part – as he did in the previous World Cup. From a theoretical point of view, Suarez, [Edinson] Cavani, [Martin] Caceres – all that generation are at an ideal age. And they could progress to another World Cup, maybe not getting better physically but with more experience.

Diego Forlan was player of the tournament in 2010. He's been playing less but is still one of the stars of the Uruguay team. What will his role be in Brazil?
He had a good Confederations Cup, he

LONGEST SERVING COACHES

ratified his standing. You can lose physical attributes like speed but there are many things that increase [with age] like experience. The big question is, can Forlan return to the national team? I think so.

Several players changed clubs in the January transfer window and there are probably more players at arguably lesser clubs in the squad than four years ago...
The mere fact that they are playing means they are in better condition. It's about match fitness. I have to take those players who give me guarantees of their form – and that's largely down to being active. I'm not worried about where they are playing.

What will Uruguay's style be?
We work very well in defence. I love that kind of thing, I'm not ashamed, as if playing defensively were a bad word. Football is defence and attack, and attacking is closely linked to what you do in defence – and we don't have a team to take the game to our opponents nor that many players. We don't have so many options. When you find things that work for you, you reaffirm them.

Do expectations after Uruguay's achievement in winning the World Cup in Brazil in 1950 worry you?
That's anecdotal and people realise that. It's part of Uruguayan folklore. It doesn't change the present reality of Brazilian and Uruguayan football. It is so different to what it was in that era. Uruguay had a very different position in the world and in football was not inferior to Brazil. But [Brazil's] objective of winning at home won't be easy. Uruguay, Chile, Ecuador, Belgium, Portugal, Croatia – I think these teams can be tough and spring surprises – as always happens at World Cups. We weren't champions in South Africa, we were fourth, but the fans responded [receiving the team in Montevideo as if they had won the tournament]. We are the ones who mustn't get caught up in the euphoria but the enthusiasm is understandable.

Interview by Rex Gowar

"The USA are capable of getting big results"

JURGEN KLINSMANN

How have your experiences as a World Cup player affected your approach as a World Cup coach?
What you learn is how important team chemistry can be to success, and how you must stay focused throughout the tournament. In 1990 we had a group who was totally committed and willing to suffer for each other. In 1994, as a team, we were a bit overconfident and that showed in our approach.

What did it feel like to lift the World Cup trophy in 1990 and how often do you think about it?
Obviously as a player this is one of the most special moments in your career. You appreciate it more as time goes on because in your travels around the world you are always identified as a World Cup winner and this is something people never forget. I really don't look back in the past too much. I'm only focused on the present and the future.

How much of an impact do you think coaching Germany at the 2006 World Cup has on how you'll approach the 2014 World Cup?
The most important thing to learn is that a team has to be prepared mentally and physically for a two-month period, beginning with an intense preparation camp. You must prepare as if you are going to reach the final. The minute you start thinking different is the minute your focus turns away. Not only that, but you must continue to grow and get stronger as a team as the tournament goes on. I'm not saying we are going to win the World Cup, but we are going to be ready for every game and see how far we can go.

All angles...Klinsmann has been involved as both a player and a coach at the finals

Historic...Michael Orozco scored the winning goal away to Mexico

Would you have preferred not to play Germany at the World Cup?
It's a special opportunity to play against Germany. I'm proud that the staff I put in place in 2006 is still there, and they have an amazing team capable of winning the World Cup. It's going to be a big test for us, but we will be ready.

How close is the team to playing the style of football you hoped for when you took over in 2011?
The most important thing that we have seen in the last year is the development of consistency. We are continuing to improve on being a team that plays high pressure, keeps possession and can compete with the best teams. Over the past two years, we have demonstrated that we are capable of getting big results: like beating Italy away for the first time, winning against Mexico at Estadio Azteca for the first time, and coming back against a great Bosnia-Herzegovina team in Sarajevo. Those performances build confidence and we hope to carry that into Brazil.

What kind of performance from the USA in Brazil would satisfy you?
Our goal is to get out of the group, and we believe we will do that. In the knockout phase, we hope to surprise some of the top teams in the world.

Interview by Mike Woitalla

WORLD CUP PLAYING RECORD

		GAMES PLAYED	GOALS SCORED
ITALY	1990	●●●●●●●	●●●
USA	1994	●●●●●	●●●●●
FRANCE	1998	●●●●●	●●●

The genius of Guardiola

Jonathan Wilson applauds the Bayern coach's short and long-term planning

The way forward...Guardiola fought desperately to keep Barcelona's players from going stale and is doing the same thing at Bayern Munich

Some coaches think only of the game in progress, doing whatever it takes to win that match and letting the consequences take care of themselves. Others look to the month ahead, resting a player here and there to keep them fresh for key games. And then there are those who plot out the course of the whole season, ensuring that nobody plays too many minutes, even if it means taking them off when games seem finely poised.

Pep Guardiola, meanwhile, seems to see beyond even that, at times appearing to be considering cycles of several years.

All teams decay; all teams need renewal. Sometimes it's a question of age, but more often it seems that players who spend protracted periods together under the same coach simply grow stale; that either their hunger for success fades or they simply grow so used to each other's company that complacency sets in. Things can become habitual and a certain freshness and hardness is lost. As the great Hungarian coach Bela Guttmann famously noted: "The third year is fatal."

> "My wife, Cristina, often complains about my tactics. She keeps on telling me that I should stick with the players who won the last match"
>
> Pep Guardiola

What was fascinating about Guardiola in his final season at Barcelona was that he seemed aware of this and fought desperately to stave it off.

There has been a staleness about Barca over the past couple of seasons, a sense that they have settled into over-familiar patterns and have lost intensity as a result. The press is not as hard or as high as it once was. Lionel Messi, for instance, has gone from retrieving possession through interceptions or tackles 2.1 times per league game in 2010-11 to 0.5 this season. The energy had dipped.

Yet Guardiola tried to shake things up, to change the patterns. He brought in Zlatan Ibrahimovic to offer variety of attack, but the Swedish striker never settled into the Barca system, while his personality threatened to destabilise the squad. Guardiola also experimented with a back three, which brought some success, most notably the 3-1 win away to Real Madrid in December 2011.

Guardiola seemed particularly troubled by teams who sat deep against

his side and so devised more and more ways to get players into attacking positions, pushing his full-backs higher and higher until, at times, it seemed as though he was playing with a back two. That had the unfortunate effect of meaning that when players, particularly the full-backs, received the ball they were often static rather than bursting onto passes. That meant a lack of depth of attack and, if anything, made Barca's play even less vertical than it had been.

The result, ultimately, was the defeat by Chelsea in the Champions League semi-final. Barca had by far the better of the game and were unfortunate in some respects, but they were unable to generate enough chances to finish the tie off. Guardiola, overcome as much by the three-year rule, took 12 months off after his fourth year in charge.

Holding back

At Bayern Munich there is a strange sensation that Guardiola is wilfully holding the squad back. At the very highest level, a coach is like a gardener: once the flower blossoms fully or the fruit becomes fully ripe, its moment of decay has begun. Retard that maturation and the life of the flower or fruit is extended. And so it is with the very best teams.

Ajax produced their best football after the relatively gentle Stefan Kovacs had replaced the martinet Rinus Michels in 1971 and the players began fully to express themselves. But that freedom and fluency, after its glorious blooming in 1972 and 1973, led ultimately to decadence.

If there have been complaints this season – and there have, even as Bayern's unbeaten run in the Bundesliga extended beyond the 50-game mark – it is that they haven't quite produced the fluency of their very best last season. That, in part, is down to Guardiola's constant tinkering with the team. And that is because he has a large squad and has to keep everybody happy, something he has done remarkably well.

Mario Mandzukic, for instance, was dropped for two games in January, apparently after letting his focus drift as he realised he will be shunted aside for the arrival of Robert Lewandowski in the summer. He returned to score six goals in five games in February. Thomas Muller has made clear he was frustrated to miss both legs against Arsenal, but said he was "too clever" to complain.

Guardiola's rotation, his tweaks for every opponent, has kept everybody on their toes. Paradoxically, for a man often painted as a perfectionist, he has sacrificed some of the fluidity that comes from the mutual understanding of a settled side for the hunger that comes from each player knowing he will be replaced if his level drops. That's not to say he isn't focused on the here and now. During games Guardiola is a micro-manager. Bayern's 2-0 victory over Arsenal at the Emirates offered the perfect example of the influence he exerts over games.

He clearly wasn't happy with the opening 10-15 minutes, when Arsenal

Pivotal...Robben is taken down by Szczesny

started as they had against Napoli and tore into Bayern. From an early stage, Guardiola was out at the edge of his technical area, directing the play.

Two interventions in particular stood out. The first came after 31 minutes when Kieran Gibbs was injured and replaced by Nacho Monreal. Guardiola immediately shifted Arjen Robben across so he, Mario Gotze and Philipp Lahm all ganged up on the Spaniard as he tried to settle into the game. Sure enough, seven minutes later, it was from that flank that the move came that led to the penalty and Wojciech Szczesny's red card. Then in the second half, as Mesut Ozil faded, Guardiola clearly directed attacks down his flank, knowing his side would be able to overman poor, isolated Monreal.

And that, really, is Guardiola's genius. He has been blessed in that the clubs he has managed have relieved him of many of the constraints coaches of lesser squads often face, but he has demonstrated a remarkable gift for balancing the minutiae of the here and now with an awareness of the greater sweep of history. WS

SCHALKE (A), WON 4-0, BUNDESLIGA, 21.09.13

MAINZ (A), WON 2-0, BUNDESLIGA, 22.03.14

● For the first half of this season, Bayern mostly lined up 4-1-4-1, going to 4-2-3-1 after the winter break. But Guardiola likes to keep his options open and he has occasionally used Muller or Gotze as a false nine. He makes several changes to the starting line-up most weeks, with seven against Freiburg in August the most so far.

Domestic dominance...Bayern celebrate retaining the Bundesliga title after beating Hertha Berlin 3-1

Keir Radnedge

THE INSIDER

The expert view on events off the pitch

Infantino: Platini's problem solver

General secretary comes up with solutions to UEFA's practical difficulties

Tough mission...Infantino must persuade Europe that Platini's Nations League plan is workable

Gianni Infantino works hard as general secretary of UEFA. Everyone appreciates the fact. But his speciality, above all else, is achieving the near-impossible of coming up with a practical solution to every idea generated by his president, Michel Platini.

A first example was rigging the preliminary rounds of the Champions League – not fixing, that's something else – to offer clubs from the electorally crucial middle class of European football a much better chance of reaching the group stage.

Then came a second idea, also guaranteed to reassure the less fortunate, though, to be fair, that was not the main point. This was Financial Fairplay. Platini's laudable reasoning was injecting a spirit of sanity to club finance. Its potential to rein in the big spenders – and thus address the imbalance about which FIFA candidate Jerome Champagne frets – was a happy by-product.

Idea no3 was centralised marketing of qualifying competitions so that the bulk of UEFA national associations will profit from being handcuffed to the TV-rights giants – England, Germany, Spain, Italy, France, etc. This did take a little arm-twisting, but ultimately the rich uncles realised that, being outvoted, they should acquiesce with good grace in the interests of the greater good.

Four out of four for the highly capable Infantino.

Now for his greatest challenge: persuading the watching world of the beauty of the Nations League with fixtures slotted into what are, for Europe, friendly match dates in the international calendar.

"With the 'Week of Football' concept," said Platini and/or Infantino in unison, "this is good for the clubs because they will have their players back much quicker and 'only' from matches within Europe."

Of course, in the next World Cup qualifying series this will not make any difference to Lionel Messi and his like who will still jet the Atlantic, but the argument has a certain logic.

What is less obvious is quite how the Nations League will slot into an upside-down calendar if FIFA opts to stage the finals of Qatar's 2022 World Cup in November and December rather than June and July. Platini may even conjure up another competition to take up the five-month slack for those European nations not heading to the Gulf.

Years ago, when the Nyon signwriters rebuilt the UEFA Cup with those ridiculous five-team groups, I was told by Lars-Christer Olsson (the Infantino of his day) that all the rebranding in the world could not protect the credibility of a competition which baffled the fans. Hence a further step-change to produce the Europa League as it is today.

The Nations League (see *The World This Month*, page 8) runs the same risk. The international game is on the retreat from the club juggernaut and the Nations League is a weapon with which Platini is seeking to fight back – as long as Infantino can compute the practical goods once more.

Just to inject extra mischief, Platini might not be UEFA president in 2018 when the Nations League kicks off. He says he will decide this coming autumn whether to stand for the FIFA presidency next year. He has admitted he sees himself as the only candidate with the potential to oust Sepp Blatter.

> The international game is on the retreat from the club juggernaut and Platini is seeking to fight back

However, with ex-FIFA official Champagne positioning himself for what the FIFA future may hold, and Blatter expected to say on the eve of the World Cup that he is fit to carry on, Platini has been left appearing to dither. Not the appropriate image for a leader.

He always had the fall-back reason of wanting to stay with UEFA to see through Financial Fairplay, to oversee the Euro 2016 finals in his native France and to develop plans for the pan-European 2020 tournament. Now he has yet another reason for resisting the lure of Zurich: to launch the Nations League.

Hopefully, for his sake, he can get Infantino to stick around as well. **WS**

● Read Keir Radnedge's exclusive online columns at worldsoccer.com

Warner allegations test FIFA's patience

Tracking the 2018 and 2022 World Cup bidding process has become so confused that claim and counter-claim collide regularly in the vicious circle of scandal.

Recent headlines sparked a new turn of the mill with reports of several million dollars passing hands from a company owned by Mohamed Bin Hammam to those of Jack Warner, his sons, their companies and associates.

Next came more excitement about how Warner – former president of CONCACAF and vice-president of FIFA – had inveigled $462,000 out of the Australia 2022 bid team to upgrade the Marvin Lee stadium in Macoya, Trinidad.

The spin was obvious, with the payment having been made four months before the World Cup host votes. Whatever that says about Warner knowing a good thing when he saw one, it offered nothing positive either about the Australian bid.

The cash "grant" was picked up a year ago by the CONCACAF inquiry into the financial quagmire which Warner had bequeathed his successors. It was also the subject of a caustic blog by former Aussie bid official Bonita Mersiades, whose insistence on wanting to play it by the book had prompted her sacking. She wrote: "The Caribbean investigative team published that Australia's money isn't mentioned in any financial records. It disappeared. Evaporated. The bank account it went to wasn't anything to do with football. It was a Warner personal account. The report concludes Warner 'misappropriated' the money and committed a 'fraud'."

Last year FIFA's independent investigator Michael Garcia launched his own inquiries into the 2018/2022 bid process and the roles of all the people involved. It is understood that one of the first major documents he perused was that CONCACAF report.

Not that everyone within the old guard at FIFA is happy with Garcia and his ethics role. An attempt was made, at the spring ExCo meeting in Zurich, to force the removal of not only the American but his entire role.

A nucleus within the ExCo stopped that plot dead in its tracks – for the time being, at least. But the fact that it even took place illustrates both the fragility of the reform process and a dictatorial arrogance which still wafts through the corridors of power.

As one ExCo member told me, terminating Garcia would have been the PR disaster to beat them all.

Under fire...Warner and Bin Hammam while, inset, ex Aussie bid official Mersiades wants answers

Record strike...Masek (right) scores after 15 seconds against Mexico

Czechs of 1962 were a different class

Those old black-and-white films of olde-tyme football are fascinating trips back in time, right down to the fashions being worn by the fans in the stands.

A few days after watching the flickering images of Brazil's 3-1 win over Czechoslovakia in the 1962 World Cup Final, I had the chance to sit down and prod the memories of three of the losers' squad: Josef Jelinek, Vaclav Masek and the incomparable Josef Masopust.

Masek, against Mexico in the group phase, had scored what was then the fastest goal in finals' history. He recalled how the Mexicans appeared still asleep, how Masopust delivered the ball into his path and how he shot in haste for fear of the goalkeeper rushing out to narrow the angle.

"We went out for every game and just played from the heart," said Masek wistfully. "If we told players today how we lived and played they would think we were idiots."

Third-party ownership, first-world problem

UEFA and FIFPro are gunning for third party ownership (TPO). For the European federation and the European-based international players' union, TPO is the eighth deadly sin. But Europe is not the world.

In Mexico recently – at a Hall of Fame gala in Pachuca – one senior official lauded a system which, he thought, put more money in a player's pocket and provided more off-pitch support than could many impoverished clubs.

He conceded TPO can be confusing, but wondered how a federation could claim the right to legislate against a player's freedom to exploit his financial potential.

Arrant capitalism, it seems, is fine when it serves the commercial needs of federations, leagues and clubs. So why not for players? There is more to this argument than currently meets the European ear.

Talentscout

Gabriel PALETTA

CLUB	Parma
COUNTRY	Italy
POSITION	Defender
AGE	28 (15.02.86)
PREVIOUS CLUBS	Banfield (Arg), Liverpool (Eng), Boca Juniors (Arg)
CAPS	1 (0 goals)
INTERNATIONAL DEBUT	March 2014, v Spain
HONOURS	2008 Argentinian apertura; 2008 Recopa Sudamericana; 2005 Under-20 World Cup

On the morning after Italy's less-than-convincing performance in a 1-0 loss to Spain in Madrid, there was only one positive note sounded by the critics. So impressive was the debut of Parma's Paletta that they concluded the big central defender had just booked himself a place in the squad for Brazil.

Authoritative sports daily *Gazzetta dello Sport* named him Italy's man of the match while, perhaps more significantly, coach Cesare Prandelli singled him out for praise in the context of a game in which Italy had been run ragged, saying: "Paletta represents the best thing about tonight's game."

Paletta's journey from Buenos Aires to Italy's national team has taken him on a long and winding road. His original breakthrough came in 2005 with local club Banfield and he earned a place in the Argentina side that won the summer's Under-20 World Cup in Holland. They beat Nigeria 2-1 in the Final with both goals scored by a youngster called Lionel Messi.

Within months Paletta was snapped up by Liverpool for €2.2million, but the under-20 finals were to be the last time he would line up for his country of birth. Furthermore, the 2006-07 season proved to be a disaster as he played just eight times for his new club side.

Reflecting on that period, Paletta recently told *La Repubblica*: "[Rafa] Benitez had spotted me and wanted me to go to England. That was the team that had won the Champions League [in 2005] and it was very strong. Benitez kept on telling me how good I was, but I almost never played.

"In the end, I got fed up and went home. I'd had an offer from Boca and how could I refuse?

"Looking back, I think I probably should have been more patient but I didn't have a good time at Liverpool. It was always cold and I was very much alone. In the whole year that I was there I never once had dinner with a team-mate."

Although his three years with Boca were relatively successful they were marred by a cruciate-ligament injury in the 2008-09 season that kept him out of action for six months. And concern about that injury saw Serie A side Palermo drop plans to sign him in 2009.

Fortunately for Paletta, Parma stepped in a year later and bought him for €2.5m. Despite a hesitant start, he has established himself a fans' favourite and a major reason why Roberto Donadoni's side were in sixth place at the beginning of March.

> "I grew up in Argentina. My loved ones are there, my son was born there, but I feel Italian"
> Gabriel Paletta

His form did not go unnoticed by Prandelli – whose son, Niccolo, works for Parma as a physio – and last summer it was suggested that Paletta could qualify to play for Italy as his great-grandfather had emigrated to Argentina from Crotone in Calabria.

In making his Italy debut against Spain, Paletta joined a long line of talented Italo-Argentinian "*oirundi*" (natives) who have played for Italy – from Raimundo Orsi, Luis Monti and Enrique Guaita at the 1934 World Cup, to Mauro Camoranesi in the 2006 tournament, and Juventus striker Pablo Osvaldo in Prandelli's current set-up.

Paddy Agnew

Switch...Paletta is the latest Argentinian-born player to have been capped by Italy

Julian GREEN

CLUB	Bayern Munich (Ger)
COUNTRY	USA
POSITION	Forward
AGE	18 (06.06.95)
CAPS	1 (0 goals)
INTERNATIONAL DEBUT	April 2014, v Mexico

Jurgen Klinsmann might have dealt his homeland a severe blow when he persuaded Bayern Munich winger Julian Green to opt for a representative career with the USA.

Born in Tampa, Florida, to an American father and a German mother, Green and his parents moved to Germany when he was two and he has been convinced to sign up for the "Stars and Stripes" by their charismatic coach.

"If it was any other coach but Klinsmann, I'm not sure we would be where we are now," says the teenager's dad, Jerry, a retired US military man. "'Klinsi' is someone Julian identifies with. He played for Bayern, coached Germany and has won the World Cup."

A quick, two-footed dribbler, Green junior was a prolific goalscorer for Bayern's reserves and, following a three-minute cameo in the Champions League this season against CSKA Moscow, he was handed his first pro contract in November. A month later he earned a place in the squad for the Club World Cup.

But as Green's Bundesliga career looks all set for take off, for once the German federation has been caught flat-footed when it comes to snapping up young talent for the international stage.

> "I know my son. I can understand how the environment of the American team would be attractive to him"
> Julian Green's father, Jerry

"We are absolutely thrilled that Julian has chosen to be part of the US national team programme," says Klinsmann. "He is a very special talent, an exciting player with a tremendously bright future."

Nick Bidwell

Choices...Bayern starlet Green has answered the call from United States coach Klinsmann

New challenges...Mane now needs to test his ability in one of Europe's big leagues

Sadio MANE

CLUB	Salzburg (Aut)
COUNTRY	Senegal
POSITION	Midfielder
AGE	22 (10.04.92)
PREVIOUS CLUB	Metz (Fra)
HONOURS	2014 Austrian league
CAPS	14 (4 goals)
INTERNATIONAL DEBUT	May 2012, v Morocco

Having helped his club Salzburg wrap up this season's Austrian championship in record time – two months ahead of the scheduled finish – the time is right for Sadio Mane to try his luck in one of Europe's top leagues, according to national team coach, Alain Giresse.

"On the basis of his form for us, he has proved he can compete in one of the five best championships in the world," says Senegal boss Giresse. "Whether he opts for England, Spain, Germany, France or Italy, he will not be out of place.

"He has enormous potential, and if he is to tap into all that talent he must face better opponents and better clubs."

Since joining Salzburg from Metz in 2012, the winger has gone from strength to strength, racking up over 30 league goals, supplying assist upon assist, and scoring home and away as Ajax were emphatically beaten in the Europa League's round of 32.

Equally at home on either flank, he can also perform in a more central playmaking role.

"Mane twists, turns, pirouettes and generally is so unpredictable," says former Senegal right-back Ferdinand Coly. "We have to make use of someone with his abilities in our national team. He is a player to destabilise a defence."

Hailing from Sedhiou in the south west of Senegal, Mane joined the Generation Foot academy in Dakar at the age of 16. Within two years he was on the migratory trail to France and second division Metz, who have a partnership agreement with his alma mater.

Salzburg were impressed and made a huge offer of €4million. A widespread view at the time was that they had paid over the odds. It isn't looking that way anymore.

Nick Bidwell

LUAN

FULL NAME	Luan Guilherme de Jesus Vieira
CLUB	Gremio
COUNTRY	Brazil
POSITION	Forward
AGE	21 (27.03.93)
PREVIOUS CLUBS	Tanabi, America-SP

When the Brazilian state championships kicked off in mid-January, Luan was one of Gremio's hopes for the future who was set to be tried out for a few games in the first team.

Within two months all that had changed. "My telephone doesn't stop ringing, in a number of different languages," says club director Rui Costa. "And everyone wants to talk about Luan."

The rangy support striker made such an impact, especially in a difficult Libertadores Cup group, that Gremio are very pleased they have him on contract with a £50million buyout clause.

"Few clubs in the world have a player like this," boasts Gremio's youth-development specialist Junior Chavare. "He can always pull a rabbit out of the hat. He's technically refined, and reminiscent of a futsal player with his capacity to dribble and come up with things in reduced space."

This is no coincidence. Much of the youngster's early development was in futsal and his transition to the 11-a-side game came late – as can be seen in his heading ability. "I'm not very good at it and need to improve," admits Luan. "I like the ball on the floor."

He came to Gremio's attention after a few games for minor Sao Paulo clubs Tanabi and America (from his home city of Sao Jose do Rio Preto), and made the trip south to Porto Alegre in February last year. Gremio worked on his technique and enjoyed the results as he made his mark for their under-20 side.

The arrival of Enderson Moreira this year as first-team coach saw Gremio adopt a tactic of using players who were flexible working within a set-up of a centre-forward and two wide men. Argentina international Hernan Barcos is the target man, with Luan floating either side of him, swapping flanks with 39-year-old Ze Roberto, while two of the midfield trio, Ramiro and Paraguay's Cristian Riveros, also look to break into the box.

> "I am not scared of anything. On the field nothing intimidates me" Luan

With plenty of options around him, Luan has slotted in well.

"He's not one of those naturally talented players who just look down at the ball," says former Gremio player Batista, who was in Brazil's 1978 and 1982 World Cup squads.

"He's aware of what is going on around him and it is that vision that makes him so promising."

Football will surely not always be as easy for Luan as it has appeared in the opening few months of his big time career. But then life itself has not been easy for a youngster who was brought up by his mother, a cleaner, from the age of five after he lost his father in a traffic accident.

Tim Vickery

Close control...Luan was a latecomer to the 11-a-side game, having initially developed his skills playing futsal

Unflappable...Tielemans shields the ball from Paris Saint-Germain's Ezequiel Lavezzi

Youri TIELEMANS

CLUB	Anderlecht
COUNTRY	Belgium
POSITION	Midfielder
AGE	16 (07.05.97)

Anderlecht obviously know what they are doing with their "Purple Talents" programme: a high-grade mix of educational attainment and football training which has fashioned both Romelu Lukaku and teenager Youri Tielemans, the holding midfielder who has proved a revelation in his first season as a professional.

The role of defensive midfielder in the modern game is not normally one for a novice. But when Tielemans holds the fort, he makes everything seem absurdly easy. Several pundits believe he will one day be a top-ranking number 10 and it could well happen soon.

> "At 16, I was playing schoolboy football. Youri, on the other hand, is already a regular with a top club"
> Tielemans' Anderlecht team-mate Guillaume Gillet

"When I first saw him in training, I straightaway understood what a great talent he is," says Anderlecht right-back Guillaume Gillet. "His first touch is fantastic, and he is brilliant in his ball-control and ability to make space and time for himself. He's an instinctive reader of the game and always looks to play the ball forwards."

Tielemans' meteoric rise to fame has taken no one at Anderlecht by surprise. On the books of the Brussels aristocrats for more than a decade, he has been star-pupil material, invariably competing in older-age categories.

"He's received his entire football education with us and has picked up the technical style we appreciate so much here," says the club's youth-development director, Jean Kindermans. "As well as his natural ability, he's also a very willing worker. He's always applied himself on the training ground and been keen to progress.

"When such an exceptional talent works like he does, you're talking about a rare jewel."

In contrast to ex-Anderlecht starlets Adnan Januzaj and Charly Musonda Jnr – who quit the youth team for Manchester United and Chelsea respectively – Tielemans prefers the comforts, certainties and common sense of staying put.

"His mother wants him to finish his secondary school education in Belgium," says Kindermans. "It's something she insists on. For me, it's a breath of fresh air to have parents worried more about their son's qualifications than his wallet."

Nick Bidwell

Shkodran MUSTAFI

CLUB	Sampdoria (Ita)
COUNTRY	Germany
POSITION	Defender
AGE	21 (17.04.92)
PREVIOUS CLUB	Everton (Eng)
HONOURS	2009 European Under-17 Championship

Everton supporters must have been amazed on hearing the news that the central defender they discarded two years ago had been called into Germany's senior squad for March's friendly against Chile.

Plucked out of the Hamburg youth ranks a few weeks after helping Germany's under-17 side secure the 2009 European title, Mustafi was unable to adapt to his new cultural and sporting context in England. He made just one first-team appearance for Everton – a 15-minute substitute outing in the Europa League against BATE Borisov – before being offloaded to Sampdoria on a free transfer.

Born in Germany of Albanian parents, Mustafi now looks back on his miserable two-and-a-half years on Merseyside and claims it made him "grow up quicker". Yet whatever the spin, the wounds of big-league rejection do take time to heal and Samp gave him all the time he needed to settle in, recalibrate, adjust and rebuild.

He started a dozen Serie A games last season and has graduated to automatic selection this term, impressing week in and week out with his power in the air, well-timed challenges, good anticipation and consistency.

He is also a fine organiser and leader, usually the most vocal and assertive player in the Samp back four. "If there's something to say during a game, I'll say it," he declares. "It doesn't matter if I'm talking to a young player or someone more experienced than me. I've captained young German representative sides and am comfortable with the responsibility.

"I didn't expect to be included in the senior national team for a moment. This is my first season as regular club player and in Germany I haven't really been on the radar. All the same, it's a great, great feeling to be in [national coach] Herr Low's plans."

Nick Bidwell

On the radar...Mustafi's displays in Sampdoria's defence have led to a Germany call-up

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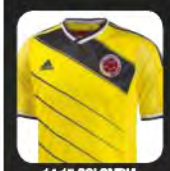
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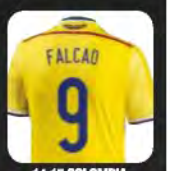

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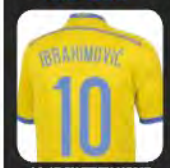

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Libertadores Cup clash...Diego Tardelli of Atletico Mineiro holds off Marcos Riveros of Paraguay's Nacional

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Too good...Celtic are Scottish champions once again

World Service

AZERBAIJAN

Coach joins the USA

Berti Vogts, who has been Azerbaijan's national coach since 2008, has joined the USA as special adviser until the World Cup. Vogts won the trophy as a player in 1974 and was in charge of the Germany side that won Euro 96 – of which current US coach Jurgen Klinsmann was a member.

BRAZIL

Olympic football 2016

Along with the host city of Rio de Janeiro, the football tournament at the 2016 Olympic Games will also be staged in the cities of Belo Horizonte, Brasilia, Salvador and Sao Paulo.

The men's competition starts on August 4, 2016, with the Final taking place on August 19.

ERITREA

No Nations Cup

Although no official reason has been given for Eritrea's withdrawal from the 2015 African Nations Cup, it is believed it may have been prompted by fears of player defections. Seventeen squad members, plus the team doctor, went missing at the 2012 CECAFA Cup in Uganda.

Car crash...Milosevski

MACEDONIA

Former keeper killed

Petar Milosevski, the sporting director of the national team, was killed in a car accident in Skopje. A former goalkeeper, he won 59 caps during his career.

The president of the Football Federation of Macedonia, Ilco Gjorgjioski, was one of three others injured in the accident.

Internationals

FRIENDLIES

Wednesday, March 5
Mar 5 - Mitrovica
Kosovo 0
Haiti 0
Att: 17,000. **Ref:** Klossner (Swi)
Kosovo: Ujkani - Pepa, Sadiku (Rexhepi 65), Hasani, Raskaj, Perdedaj, Nushi, Gashi (Krasniqi 70), Alushi, Albert Bunjaku (Toski 70), Azemi (Bytyci 65).
Haiti: Jean-Zephirin - Meshack, Guerrier, Mustivar, Bertin, Metellus (Alcenat), Belfort (Jean-Francois), Maurice, Lafrance, Ambroise, Nazon (Vorbe).

Friday, March 7
Mar 7 - Maseru
Lesotho 0
Swaziland 1 (Hlatjwako 89)
HT: 0-0

Sunday, March 9
Mar 9 - Maseru
Lesotho 0
Swaziland 0

Tuesday, March 25
Mar 25 - Doha, Qatar
Yemen 2 (Tareq 58, Barwish 66)
Nepal 0
HT: 0-0

Wednesday, March 26
Mar 26 - Alzira, Spain
Andorra 0
Indonesia 1 (Maitimo pen 49)
HT: 0-0
Andorra: Gomes - Rubio (Clemente 73), Sonejee, (E Garcia 46), Lima, Maneiro (M Garcia 46), Vales, Peppe (Vieira 71), C Martinez, Pujol, Lorenzo (Alves 59), Riera (Toscano 76).
Indonesia: Ardhiyasa - Syukur, Roby, Jufriyanto, Supardi (Sasongko 46), Pellu (Lestusen 46), Maitimo, Zamrun (Sinaga 87), Utina (Ridwan 63), Gatra (Mukminin 63), Nwokolo (Tantan 27).

Thursday, March 27
Mar 27 - Oranjestad
Aruba 2 (Baten 3, Kock pen 90+1)
Guam 2 (Cunliffe pen 65, 77)
HT: 1-0

Saturday, March 29
Mar 29 - Alzira, Spain
Cuba 1 (Roby og 30)
Indonesia 0
HT: 1-0

Sunday, March 30
Mar 30 - Oranjestad
Aruba 2 (Dumfries 28, Kock 75)
Guam 0
HT: 1-0

2015 ASIAN CUP FINALS

To be played in Australia

Match schedule

Group A
Jan 9 Australia v Kuwait (Melbourne)
Jan 10 South Korea v Oman (Canberra)
Jan 13 Kuwait v South Korea (Canberra)
Oman v Australia (Sydney)
Jan 17 Australia v South Korea (Brisbane)
Oman v Kuwait (Newcastle)

Group B
Jan 10 Uzbekistan v North Korea (Sydney)
Saudi Arabia v China (Brisbane)
Jan 14 North Korea v Saudi Arabia (Melbourne)
China v Uzbekistan (Brisbane)
Jan 18 Uzbekistan v Saudi Arabia (Melbourne)
China v North Korea (Canberra)

Group C
Jan 11 Iran v Bahrain (Melbourne)
UAE v Qatar (Canberra)
Jan 15 Bahrain v UAE (Canberra)
Qatar v Iran (Sydney)
Jan 19 Iran v UAE (Brisbane)
Qatar v Bahrain (Sydney)

Group D
CCW = 2014 AFC Challenge Cup winners

Jan 12 Japan v *CCW* (Newcastle)
Jordan v Iraq (Brisbane)
Jan 16 *CCW* v Jordan (Melbourne)
Iraq v Japan (Brisbane)
Jan 20 Japan v Jordan (Melbourne)
Iraq v *CCW* (Canberra)

Top 2 in each group qualify for quarter-finals

Quarter-finals
Jan 22 Gp A 1st v Gp B 2nd (Melbourne) (QF1)
Gp B 1st v Gp A 2nd (Brisbane) (QF2)
Jan 23 Gp C 1st v Gp D 2nd (Sydney) (QF3)
Gp D 1st v Gp C 2nd (Canberra) (QF4)

Semi-finals
Jan 26 QF1 winners v QF3 winners (Sydney)
Jan 27 QF2 winners v QF4 winners (Newcastle)

3rd-place match
Jan 30 (Newcastle)

Final
Jan 31 (Sydney)

2014 AFC CHALLENGE CUP FINALS

To be played in the Maldives

Match schedule

Group A
May 19 Palestine v Kyrgyzstan
Maldives v Myanmar
May 21 Myanmar v Palestine
Kyrgyzstan v Maldives
May 23 Maldives v Palestine
Kyrgyzstan v Myanmar

Group B
May 20 Turkmenistan v Laos
Philippines v Afghanistan
May 22 Laos v Philippines
Afghanistan v Turkmenistan
May 24 Turkmenistan v Philippines
Afghanistan v Laos

Top 2 in both groups qualify for semi-finals

Semi-finals
May 27 Gp A 1st v Gp B 2nd
Gp B 1st v Gp A 2nd

3rd-place match
May 29

Final
May 30

Winners qualify for 2015 Asian Cup finals

2015 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP

Qualifying format

1st qualifying round
Mauritania v Mauritius
1st leg - Apr 12, 2014; 2nd leg - Apr 18-20, 2014

Eritrea v South Sudan – Eritrea withdrew after draw was made; South Sudan go through

2nd qualifying round
South Sudan and the winners of the Mauritania v Mauritius 1st qualifying round game will be drawn with the following countries in 14 head-to-head ties:
Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Sao Tome e Principe, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe

3rd qualifying round
The 14 2nd qualifying round winners will be drawn in 7 head-to-head ties

Qualifying group stage
The 7 3rd qualifying round winners will be drawn with the following countries in 7 groups of 4 teams:
Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, DR Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Zambia

The top 2 in each group and the 3rd-placed team with the best record will qualify for the finals; hosts Morocco qualify automatically

FRIENDLY FIXTURES

(selected)

Tuesday, May 13
Germany v Poland (Hamburg)
Saturday, May 17
Holland v Ecuador (Amsterdam)
Sunday, May 18
Belarus v Iran (Vienna, Austria)
Sunday, May 25
Portugal v Egypt
Republic of Ireland v Turkey (Dublin)
Monday, May 26
Australia v South Africa (Sydney)
Belgium v Luxembourg (Brussels)
Macedonia v Cameroon (Kufstein, Austria)
Montenegro v Iran
Russia v Slovakia
Serbia v Jamaica (Harrison, USA)
South Korea v Tunisia (Seoul)
Tuesday, May 27
France v Norway (Paris)
Japan v Cyprus (Saitama)
United States v Azerbaijan (San Francisco)
Wednesday, May 28
Denmark v Sweden (Copenhagen)
Mexico v Israel (Mexico City)
Scotland v Nigeria (London)
Thursday, May 29
Cameroon v Paraguay (Kufstein, Austria)
Honduras v Turkey (Washington DC, USA)
Friday, May 30
Austria v Iceland (Innsbruck)
Bosnia-Herzegovina v Ivory Coast (St Louis, USA)
Chile v Egypt (Santiago)
England v Peru (London)
Iran v Angola (Vienna, Austria)
Spain v Bolivia (Seville)
Switzerland v Jamaica (Lucerne)
Uruguay v Northern Ireland (Montevideo)
Saturday, May 31
Algeria v Armenia (Geneva, Switzerland)
Croatia v Mali
Holland v Ghana (Rotterdam)
Italy v Republic of Ireland (London)
Mexico v Ecuador (Arlington, USA)
Norway v Russia (Oslo)
Panama v Serbia (Bridgeview, USA)
Portugal v Greece (Lisbon)
Sunday, June 1
France v Paraguay (Nice)
Germany v Cameroon (Monchengladbach)
Honduras v Israel (Houston, USA)
Sweden v Belgium (Stockholm)
United States v Turkey (Harrison)
Monday, June 2
Costa Rica v Japan (Tampa, USA)
Tuesday, June 3
Brazil v Panama (Goiania)
Czech Republic v Austria (Olomouc)
Greece v Nigeria (Chester, USA)
Mexico v Bosnia-Herzegovina (Chicago, USA)
Switzerland v Peru (Lucerne)
Wednesday, June 4
Algeria v Romania (Geneva, Switzerland)
Argentina v Trinidad & Tobago (La Plata)
Chile v Northern Ireland (Valparaiso)
Ecuador v England (Miami, USA)
El Salvador v Ivory Coast (Frisco, USA)
Holland v Wales (Amsterdam)
Hungary v Albania
Italy v Luxembourg
Uruguay v Slovenia (Montevideo)
Friday, June 6
Brazil v Serbia (Sao Paulo)
Croatia v Australia (Brazil)
Germany v Armenia (Mainz)
Greece v Bolivia (Harrison, USA)
Japan v Zambia (Tampa, USA)
Mexico v Portugal (Foxborough, USA)
Russia v Morocco
Saturday, June 7
Argentina v Slovenia (Buenos Aires)
Belgium v Tunisia (Brussels)
Costa Rica v Republic of Ireland (Foxborough, USA)
El Salvador v Spain (Washington DC, USA)
England v Honduras (Miami, USA)
Hungary v Kazakhstan
United States v Nigeria (Jacksonville)
Sunday, June 8
France v Jamaica (Lille)
Trinidad & Tobago v Iran (Sao Paulo, Brazil)
Tuesday, June 10
Republic of Ireland v Portugal (New York, USA)

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ESM TEAM OF THE MONTH MARCH 2014

European Sports Media

Gerard Pique, Barcelona ●●●● ●
Martin Skrtel, Liverpool ●●●● ●●●● ●
Thibaut Courtois, Atletico Madrid ●●●● ●
Diego Godin, Atletico Madrid ●●●●
Leighton Baines, Everton ●●●●

Andrea Pirlo, Juventus ●●●● ●●
Lionel Messi, Barcelona ●●●● ●●●● ●●●●●
Luis Suarez, Liverpool ●●●● ●●●● ●●●
Yaya Toure, Manchester City ●●●● ●
Andres Iniesta, Barcelona ●●●● ●
Cristiano Ronaldo, Real Madrid ●●●●

HOW IT WORKS

Every month, journalists from each member of the European Sports Media group select their first XI based on the best individual performances from Europe's top competitions. For details of how each ESM member voted, visit worldsoccer.com/esm11

SEASON RANKINGS

Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	18
Thibaut Courtois (Atletico Madrid)	16
Gianluigi Buffon (Juventus)	6
Vincent Enyeama (Lille)	6
Morgan De Sanctis (Roma)	5
Victor Valdes (Barcelona)	4
Iker Casillas (Real Madrid)	3
Artur Boruc (Southampton)	2
Petr Cech (Chelsea)	2
Joe Hart (Manchester City)	2
Hugo Lloris (Tottenham Hotspur)	2
Diego Lopez (Real Madrid)	2
Salvatore Sirigu (Paris Saint-Germain)	2
Roman Weidenfeller (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Jasper Cillessen (Ajax)	1
Andrea Consigli (Atalanta)	1
Ralf Fahrmann (Schalke)	1
Fraser Forster (Celtic)	1
Samir Handanovic (Internazionale)	1
Helton (Porto)	1
Tim Krul (Newcastle United)	1
Bernd Leno (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Vito Mannone (Sunderland)	1
Simon Mignolet (Liverpool)	1
Keylor Navas (Levante)	1
Pepe Reina (Napoli)	1
Wojciech Szczesny (Arsenal)	1
Marc-Andre Ter Stegen (Bor M'gladbach)	1

DEFENDERS

David Alaba (Bayern Munich)	21
Mehdi Benatia (Roma)	20
Gerard Pique (Barcelona)	19
Pepe (Real Madrid)	17
Dante (Bayern Munich)	16
Martin Skrtel (Liverpool)	14
Dani Alves (Barcelona)	12
Per Mertesacker (Arsenal)	12
Branislav Ivanovic (Chelsea)	11
Thiago Silva (Paris Saint-Germain)	11
Marcelo (Real Madrid)	10
Diego Godin (Atletico Madrid)	9
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	8
Filipe Luis (Atletico Madrid)	8
Gregory Van der Wiel (Paris Saint-Germain)	8
Leighton Baines (Everton)	6
Giorgio Chiellini (Juventus)	6
Vincent Kompany (Manchester City)	6
Pablo Zabaleta (Manchester City)	6
Andrea Barzagli (Juventus)	5
Jerome Boateng (Bayern Munich)	5
Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid)	5
Cesar Azpilicueta (Chelsea)	4
Federico Balzaretti (Roma)	4
Gary Cahill (Chelsea)	4
Juanfran (Atletico Madrid)	4
Laurent Koscielny (Arsenal)	4
Marquinhos (Paris Saint-Germain)	4
Mamadou Sakho (Liverpool)	4
Seamus Coleman (Everton)	3
Kevin Grosskreutz (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Stephan Lichtsteiner (Juventus)	3
Maxwell (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Bacary Sagna (Arsenal)	3
Omer Toprak (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus)	2
Leandro Castan (Roma)	2
Patrice Evra (Manchester United)	2
Fabinho (Monaco)	2
Kieran Gibbs (Arsenal)	2
Simon Kjaer (Lille)	2
Layvin Kurzawa (Monaco)	2
Luisao (Benfica)	2
Maicon (Roma)	2
Kostas Manolas (Olympiakos)	2
Miranda (Atletico Madrid)	2
Rafinha (Bayern Munich)	2
John Terry (Chelsea)	2
Adriano (Barcelona)	1
Daniel Agger (Liverpool)	1
Jordi Alba (Barcelona)	1
Alvaro Arbeloa (Real Madrid)	1
Sebastian Boenisch (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Paolo Cannavaro (Napoli)	1
Aly Cissokho (Liverpool)	1
Gael Clichy (Manchester City)	1
Juan Cuadrado (Fiorentina)	1
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	1
Danilo (Porto)	1
Mathieu Debuchy (Newcastle United)	1
Martin Demichelis (Manchester City)	1
Lorenzo De Silvestri (Sampdoria)	1
Jon Flanagan (Liverpool)	1
Ezequiel Garay (Benfica)	1
Christoph Jallet (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Glen Johnson (Liverpool)	1
Aleksandar Kolarov (Manchester City)	1
Christian Maggio (Napoli)	1
Alberto Moreno (Sevilla)	1
Naldo (Werder Bremen)	1
Andrea Ranocchia (Internazionale)	1
Luke Shaw (Southampton)	1
Dario Srna (Shakhtar Donetsk)	1
Neven Subotic (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Vasilis Torosidis (Roma)	1
Benoit Tremoulinas (Saint-Etienne)	1
Ricardo Van Rhijn (Ajax)	1
Kyle Walker (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Kurt Zouma (Saint-Etienne)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Philipp Lahm (Bayern Munich)	24
Yaya Toure (Manchester City)	22
Arturo Vidal (Juventus)	20
Aaron Ramsey (Arsenal)	17
Mesut Ozil (Arsenal)	16
Franck Ribery (Bayern Munich)	13
Eden Hazard (Chelsea)	12
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	11
Paul Pogba (Juventus)	11
Andrea Pirlo (Juventus)	9
Mario Gotze (Bayern Munich)	7
Andres Iniesta (Barcelona)	7
Toni Kroos (Bayern Munich)	6
Gareth Bale (Real Madrid)	5
Koke (Atletico Madrid)	5
Marco Reus (Borussia Dortmund)	5
Bastian Schweinsteiger (Bayern Munich)	5
Marco Verratti (Paris Saint-Germain)	5
Arda Turan (Atletico Madrid)	4
Daniele De Rossi (Roma)	4
Cesc Fabregas (Barcelona)	4
Steven Gerrard (Liverpool)	4
Isco (Real Madrid)	4
Miralem Pjanic (Roma)	4
Arjen Robben (Bayern Munich)	4
Jack Wilshere (Arsenal)	4
Thiago Alcantara (Bayern Munich)	3
Santi Cazorla (Arsenal)	3
Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool)	3
Angel Di Maria (Real Madrid)	3
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Nuri Sahin (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Xabi Alonso (Real Madrid)	2
Fernandinho (Manchester City)	2
Raul Garcia (Atletico Madrid)	2
Blaise Matuidi (Paris Saint-Germain)	2
Thomas Muller (Bayern Munich)	2
Jesus Navas (Manchester City)	2
Oscar (Chelsea)	2
Ramires (Chelsea)	2
Kevin Strootman (Roma)	2
Theo Walcott (Arsenal)	2
Jose Callejon (Napoli)	1
Emre Can (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
William Carvalho (Sporting Lisbon)	1
Christian Eriksen (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Gabi (Atletico Madrid)	1
Marek Hamsik (Napoli)	1
Jordan Henderson (Liverpool)	1
Kaka (Milan)	1
Leandro (Olympiakos)	1
Dries Mertens (Napoli)	1
Marco Pavolo (Parma)	1
Ricardo Quaresma (Porto)	1
Ivan Rakitic (Sevilla)	1
James Rodriguez (Monaco)	1
Mohamed Salah (Basle/Chelsea)	1
Wesley Sneijder (Galatasaray)	1
Oliver Torres (Atletico Madrid)	1
Borja Valero (Fiorentina)	1
Xavi (Barcelona)	1

FORWARDS

Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Paris Saint-Germain)	41
Luis Suarez (Liverpool)	39
Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid)	37
Diego Costa (Atletico Madrid)	30
Lionel Messi (Barcelona)	28
Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool)	11
Sergio Aguero (Manchester City)	9
Alvaro Negredo (Manchester City)	8
Neymar (Barcelona)	7
Wayne Rooney (Manchester United)	7
Radamel Falcao (Monaco)	5
Carlos Tevez (Juventus)	5
Pedro (Barcelona)	4
Samuel Eto'o (Chelsea)	3
Robert Lewandowski (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Alexis Sanchez (Barcelona)	3
Francesco Totti (Roma)	3
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	2
Antoine Griezmann (Real Sociedad)	2
Jese (Real Madrid)	2
Fernando Llorente (Juventus)	2
Kostas Mitroglou (Olympiakos/Fulham)	2
Emmanuel Adebayor (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Ricardo Alvarez (Internazionale)	1
Domenico Berardi (Sassuolo)	1
Edinson Cavani (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Gervinho (Roma)	1
Olivier Giroud (Arsenal)	1
Adam Johnson (Sunderland)	1
Alexandre Lacazette (Lyon)	1
Mario Mandzukic (Bayern Munich)	1
Adrian Ramos (Hertha Berlin)	1
Rahim Sterling (Liverpool)	1
Fernando Torres (Chelsea)	1

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More details of votes at worldsoccer.com/votes

AUSTRIA

Eighth with eight left

Salzburg won their eighth Austrian title with eight games to spare, following a 5-0 victory against Wiener Neustadt. Coach Roger Schmidt said: "It's an extraordinary achievement. The way we won it this season was truly special.

"It was still snowing and we won the title."

Celebration...Salzburg

BELARUS

Aiming for number nine

BATE warmed up for their assault on a ninth successive league title with a 1-0 win over Minsk in the Belarusian Super Cup. Filip Mladenovic scored the only goal of the game against the domestic cup holders with a first-half free-kick.

ENGLAND

Pardew's record ban

Newcastle United's Alan Pardew received the heaviest punishment ever given to a manager in the English top flight when he was suspended for seven games for head-butting Hull City midfielder David Meyler.

The 52-year-old was barred from stadia for the first three matches and then banned from the touchline for the next four.

4 red cards shown to Nemanja Vidic when playing for Manchester United against Liverpool

Club Results

EUROPE

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

1st knockout round

2nd legs

Mar 11

Atletico Madrid (Spa) 4 (Diego Costa 3, 85, Arda 40, Raul Garcia 71)
Milan (Ita) 1 (Kaka 27)
HT: 2-1. **Att:** 49,186. **Ref:** Clattenburg (Eng)
Atletico Madrid 5-1 on agg
Atletico: Courtois - Juanfran, Miranda, Godin, Filipe Luis, Arda (Rodriguez 78), Gabi, Mario Suarez, Koke (Diego 82), Raul Garcia (Sosa 72), Diego Costa.
Milan: Abbiati - Abate, Rami, Bonera, Emanuelson, De Jong (Muntari 78), Essien (Pazzini 69), Taarabt (Robinho 46), Poli, Kaka, Balotelli.

Mar 11

Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Schweinsteiger 55)
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Podolski 57)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 68,000. **Ref:** Moen (Nor)
Bayern Munich 3-1 on agg
Bayern: Neuer - Lahm, Javi Martinez, Dante, Alaba, Thiago, Schweinsteiger, Robben, Gotze (Kroos 59), Ribery (Muller 85), Mandzukic.
Arsenal: Fabianski - Sagna, Mertesacker, Koscielny, Vermaelen, Arteta (Gnabry 77), Ozil (Rosicky 46), Oxlade-Chamberlain (Flamini 84), Cazorla, Podolski, Giroud.

Mar 12

Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Messi 67, Daniel Alves 90+1)
Manchester City (Eng) 1 (Kompany 89)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 85,957. **Ref:** Lannoy (Fra)
Barcelona 4-1 on agg
Barcelona: Valdes - Daniel Alves, Pique, Mascherano, Jordi Alba, Busquets, Xavi, Fabregas (Sergi Roberto 86), Neymar (Sanchez 80), Messi, Iniesta.
Man City: Hart - Zabaleta, Kompany, Lescott, Kolarov, Toure, Fernandinho, Nasri (Jesus Navas 75), Silva (Negredo 72), Milner, Aguero (Dzeko 46).
Sent off: Zabaleta 78min.

Mar 12

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 2 (Marquinhos 13, Lavezzi 54)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 (Sam 6)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 45,596. **Ref:** Bebek (Cro)
Paris Saint-Germain 6-1 on agg
PSG: Sirigu - Jallet, Marquinhos, Thiago Silva, Digne, Cabaye, Pastore, Rabiot, Cavani (Camara 85), Ibrahimovic (Menez 72), Lavezzi (Lucas Moura 62).
Leverkusen: Leno - Donati, Wollscheid, Toprak, Guardado, Reinartz (Wagener 78), Can, Rolfes, Sam (Brandt 67), Derdiyok, Castro (Son 67).
Sent off: Can 68min.

Mar 18

Chelsea (Eng) 2 (Eto'o 4, Cahill 42)
Galatasaray (Tur) 0
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 38,038. **Ref:** Brych (Ger)
Chelsea 3-1 on agg
Chelsea: Cech - Ivanovic, Cahill, Terry, Azpilicueta, Ramires, Lampard, Willian (Kalas 90+3), Oscar (Schurrle 82), Hazard, Eto'o (Fernando Torres 86).
Galatasaray: Muslera - Alex Telles, Chedjou, Semih, Eboue (Hajrovic 77), Felipe Melo, Selcuk, Sneijder, Yekta (Hakan 67), Drogba, Burak (Umut 54).

Mar 18

Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Cristiano Ronaldo 21, 74, Morata 75)
Schalke (Ger) 1 (Hoogland 31)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 65,148. **Ref:** Karasev (Rus)
Real Madrid 9-2 on agg
Real Madrid: Casillas - Nacho, Varane, Sergio Ramos (Carvajal 70), Fabio Coentrao, Xabi Alonso (Casemiro 46), Illarramendi, Isco, Jese (Bale 8), Morata, Cristiano Ronaldo.
Schalke: Fahrmann - Hoogland, Howedes (Papadopoulos 58), Matip, Kolasinac, Ayhan (Annan 81), Neustadter, Obasi, Meyer, Draxler, Huntelaar (Szalai 46).

Mar 19

Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Kehl 38)
Zenit St Petersburg (Rus) 2 (Hulk 16, Rondon 73)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 65,829. **Ref:** Undiano Mallenco (Spa)
Borussia Dortmund 5-4 on agg
Dortmund: Weidenfeller - Piszczek, Papastathopoulos, Hummels, Schmelzer (Durm 77), Kehl, Sahin, Aubameyang (Hofmann 90+1), Mkhitaryan (Jojic 69), Grosskreutz, Lewandowski.
Zenit: Malafeev - Anyukov, Hubocan, Lombaerts (Neto 46), Criscito, Witsel, Fayzulin (Smolnikov 84), Shatov, Hulk, Danny, Kerzhakov (Rondon 62).

Mar 19

Manchester United (Eng) 3 (Van Persie pen 25, 45+1, 52)
Olympiakos (Gre) 0
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 74,662. **Ref:** Kuipers (Hol)
Manchester United 3-2 on agg
Man Utd: De Gea - Rafael, Jones, Ferdinand, Evra, Giggs, Carrick, Valencia (Young 77), Rooney, Welbeck (Fletcher 82), Van Persie (Fellaini 90+2).
Olympiakos: Roberto - Leandro Salino (Paulo Machado 74), Manolas, Marcano, Holebas, Maniatis, N'Dinga, Perez (Haedo Valdez 57), Dominguez, David Fuster (Vergos 82), Campbell.

EUROPA LEAGUE

2nd knockout round

1st legs - Mar 13; 2nd legs - Mar 20

AZ Alkmaar (Hol) v Anzhi Makhachkala (Rus)
1-0, 0-0 (agg 1-0)
Basle (Swi) v Salzburg (Aut)
0-0, 2-1 (agg 2-1)
Juventus (Ita) v Fiorentina (Ita)
1-1, 1-0 (agg 2-1)
Ludogorets (Bul) v Valencia (Spa)
0-3, 0-1 (agg 0-4)
Lyon (Fra) v Viktoria Plzen (CzR)
4-1, 1-2 (agg 5-3)
Porto (Por) v Napoli (Ita)
1-0, 2-2 (agg 3-2)
Sevilla (Spa) v Betis (Spa)
0-2, 2-0 (aet) (agg 2-2, Sevilla 4-3 on pens)
Tottenham (Eng) v Benfica (Por)
1-3, 2-2 (agg 3-5)

AUSTRIA

Mar 8: Wolfsberger 2 Admira 3; Ried 1 Salzburg 3; Wiener Neustadt 2 Sturm 1; Austria 2 Grodig 0.
Mar 9: Wacker 1 Rapid 1.
Mar 15: Grodig 1 Wacker 1; Sturm 1 Austria 1; Rapid 1 Ried 0; Admira 3 Wiener Neustadt 0.
Mar 16: Salzburg 5 Wolfsberger 0.
Mar 22: Admira 0 Austria 1; Ried 1 Grodig 4; Sturm 3 Wacker 1; Rapid 3 Wolfsberger 0.
Mar 23: Salzburg 5 Wiener Neustadt 0.
Mar 25: Wacker 0 Admira 0.
Mar 26: Wiener Neustadt 0 Rapid 3; Wolfsberger 0 Ried 2; Grodig 0 Sturm 6; Austria 3 Salzburg 0.
Mar 29: Rapid 2 Sturm 0; Admira 4 Grodig 0; Salzburg 0 Wacker 0; Wolfsberger 4 Wiener Neustadt 0.
Mar 30: Ried 2 Austria 2.

AUSTRIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Salzburg (C)	30	22	5	3	98	26	71
Rapid	30	13	9	8	51	35	48
Austria	30	12	10	8	50	37	46
Grodig	30	12	7	11	55	60	43
Ried	30	9	12	9	47	52	39
Sturm	30	9	8	13	46	49	35
Wolfsberger	30	9	8	13	45	56	35
Admira[1]	30	10	7	13	45	55	32
W Neustadt	30	8	8	14	33	72	32
Wacker	30	3	12	15	33	61	21

36-round season (9x4); bottom team will be relegated
[1]5pts deducted for breaching licensing regulations

BELGIUM

Regular season

Mar 8: Standard 2 Mechelen 0; Genk 3 Mons 1; Oostende 0 Kortrijk 0; Charleroi 1 Lierse 1; Zulte Waregem 1 Club Brugge 1; OH Leuven 1 Anderlecht 0; Lokeren 0 Waasland-Beveren 0; Cercle Brugge 1 Gent 4.
Mar 16: Club Brugge 2 Cercle Brugge 0; Anderlecht 4 Oostende 0; Gent 0 Zulte Waregem 1; Kortrijk 2 Genk 2; Mechelen 0 Charleroi 3; Lierse 1 Lokeren 2; Mons 3 OH Leuven 2; Waasland-Beveren 1 Standard 1.

BELGIUM – REGULAR – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Standard	30	20	7	3	59	17	67
Club Brugge	30	19	6	5	54	28	63
Anderlecht	30	18	3	9	61	31	57
Z Waregem	30	14	11	5	51	38	53
Lokeren	30	15	6	9	48	31	51
Genk	30	14	3	13	42	39	45
Gent	30	12	8	10	39	37	44
Kortrijk	30	10	9	11	42	44	39
Oostende	30	9	7	14	28	46	34
Charleroi	30	8	10	12	36	41	34
Cercle Brugge	30	9	6	15	29	55	33
Lierse	30	9	5	16	36	53	32
Mechelen	30	8	7	15	34	51	31
Waasland-B	30	6	13	11	28	35	31
OH Leuven	30	6	9	15	30	47	27
Mons	30	6	4	20	29	53	22

Top 6 formed championship group, 7th to 14th entered Europa League-place play-offs, 15th & 16th (bottom 2) entered relegation play-off series (the winning team will enter rel/prom play-offs, the losing team will go down)

Championship group

Mar 28: Club Brugge 5 Lokeren 1.
Mar 29: Genk 0 Zulte Waregem 3.
Mar 30: Standard 1 Anderlecht 0.

BELGIUM – CHAMPIONSHIP GROUP

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Standard	1	1	0	0	1	0	37
Club Brugge	1	1	0	0	5	1	35
Z Waregem	1	1	0	0	3	0	30
Anderlecht	1	0	0	1	0	1	29
Lokeren	1	0	0	1	1	5	26
Genk	1	0	0	1	0	3	23

10-round stage (5x2); teams carried forward half the points (rounded up) gained in the regular season

CZECH REPUBLIC

Mar 7: Liberec 1 Brno 0.
Mar 8: Znojmo 4 Jablonec 0; Ostrava 1 Pribram 1; Dukla 0 Jihlava 3; Slovacko 1 Bohemians 1905 0.
Mar 9: Olomouc 1 Mlada Boleslav 1; Sparta 1 Plzen 0.
Mar 10: Teplice 1 Slavia 0.
Mar 14: Jihlava 1 Teplice 1; Slavia 2 Znojmo 1.
Mar 15: Pribram 0 Sparta 1.
Mar 16: Jablonec 2 Olomouc 1; Brno 0 Ostrava 0; Bohemians 1905 1 Liberec 0; Plzen 0 Slovacko 0.
Mar 17: Mlada Boleslav 1 Dukla 0.
Mar 21: Liberec 3 Jablonec 0.
Mar 22: Znojmo 0 Bohemians 1905 0; Ostrava 1 Sparta 1; Slovacko 5 Brno 0; Dukla 1 Pribram 1.
Mar 23: Slavia 1 Jihlava 2; Olomouc 1 Plzen 2.
Mar 24: Teplice 0 Mlada Boleslav 1.
Mar 28: Jihlava 5 Olomouc 0; Bohemians 1905 0 Ostrava 0.
Mar 29: Pribram 3 Slovacko 2; Plzen 6 Liberec 0.
Mar 30: Jablonec 1 Teplice 1; Sparta 3 Znojmo 0; Brno 2 Dukla 1.
Mar 31: Mlada Boleslav 3 Slavia 1.

CZECH REPUBLIC

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sparta	22	18	4	0	53	13	58
Plzen	22	15	5	2	50	17	50
M Boleslav	22	11	7	4	42	23	40
Teplice	22	10	6	6	43	25	36
Liberec	22	10	5	7	25	30	35
Dukla	22	8	7	7	25	23	31
Slovacko	22	8	5	9	34	32	29
Jablonec	22	8	5	9	34	38	29
Jihlava	22	7	5	10	34	36	26
Pribram	22	6	5	11	24	39	23
Znojmo	22	5	7	10	25	31	22
Brno	22	6	4	12	22	37	22
Slavia	22	6	4	12	19	41	22
Olomouc	22	5	6	11	34	45	21
Boh'ians 1905	22	4	7	11	16	31	19
Ostrava	22	3	10	9	17	36	19

30-round season (15x2); bottom 2 will be relegated

DENMARK

Mar 7: Vestsjaelland 1 Randers 1.
Mar 8: AGF 2 AaB 5.
Mar 9: Viborg 1 Esbjerg 3; Brondby 4 Nordsjaelland 1; OB 0 Copenhagen 1.
Mar 10: Midtjylland 2 SonderjyskE 0.
Mar 14: SonderjyskE 0 Copenhagen 0.
Mar 15: Nordsjaelland 1 Vestsjaelland 2.
Mar 16: OB 1 Viborg 1; AaB 1 Midtjylland 0; Esbjerg 0 Brondby 0.
Mar 17: Randers 1 AGF 3.
Mar 21: Vestsjaelland 0 Viborg 1.
Mar 22: Midtjylland 0 Nordsjaelland 1.
Mar 23: SonderjyskE 3 AaB 2; Copenhagen 1 Randers 1; Brondby 1 OB 2.
Mar 24: AGF 0 Esbjerg 3.
Mar 28: OB 2 SonderjyskE 2.
Mar 29: Esbjerg 0 Vestsjaelland 0.
Mar 30: Randers 0 Midtjylland 3; Viborg 0 Brondby 1; AaB 2 Copenhagen 1.
Mar 31: Nordsjaelland 1 AGF 0.

24 German championships won by Bayern Munich

FAROE ISLANDS

Hansen double

Domestic cup holders Vikingur won the country's Super Cup for the first time, beating league champions HB Torshavn 2-1. Bardur Hansen scored both goals.

FRANCE

Zlatan's PSG record

Zlatan Ibrahimovic's two goals in Paris Saint-Germain's 2-0 victory against Saint-Etienne in Ligue 1 took the Swedish striker to 40 in all competitions for the season, setting a new club record for PSG.

Nantes have been banned from signing any new players until the summer of 2015. The punishment has been imposed by FIFA after they were found guilty of enticing Guinea striker Ismael Bangoura to break his contract with Dubai club Al Nasr and join them in January 2012.

New club record...Ibrahimovic

GERMANY

Technology turn off

Bundesliga clubs have rejected the introduction of goal-line technology. There was a 50-50 split in the top flight, but only three of 18 teams in the second tier voted in favour. A two-thirds majority was needed.

"This issue is now off the table," said league president Reinhard Rauball.

DENMARK

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Midtjylland	24	13	6	5	43	21	45
AaB	24	12	7	5	44	28	43
Copenhagen	24	9	9	6	39	30	36
Brondby	24	9	9	6	32	27	36
Esbjerg	24	9	6	9	38	30	33
Nordsjaelland	24	9	5	10	27	33	32
OB	24	7	9	8	35	33	30
AGF	24	8	5	11	33	45	29
Vestsjaelland	24	6	9	9	23	33	27
Randers	24	5	11	8	28	37	26
Viborg	24	6	8	10	32	42	26
SonderjyskE	24	6	6	12	27	42	24

33-round season (11x3); bottom 2 will be relegated

ENGLAND

Saturday, March 8

Cardiff 3 (Caulker 45+1, 67, Riether og 71)
Fulham 1 (Holtby 59) Att: 26,796

Chelsea 4 (Eto'o 56, Hazard pen 60, Ba 88, 89)
Tottenham 0 Att: 41,598

Crystal Palace 0
Southampton 1 (Rodriguez 37) Att: 25,073

Norwich 1 (Johnson 56)
Stoke 1 (Walters pen 73) Att: 26,646

West Bromwich 0
Manchester United 3 (Jones 34, Rooney 65, Welbeck 82) Att: 26,184

Saturday, March 15

Aston Villa 1 (Delph 82)
Chelsea 0 Att: 40,084

Everton 2 (Deulofeu 59, Coleman 90+3)
Cardiff 1 (Cala 68) Att: 38,018

Fulham 1 (Dejagah 68)
Newcastle 0 Att: 25,664

Hull 0
Manchester City 2 (Silva 14, Dzeko 90) Att: 24,895

Southampton 4 (Schneiderlin 5, Lambert 57, Rodriguez 72, Gallagher 90+7)
Norwich 2 (Elmander 85, Snodgrass 86) Att: 29,828

Stoke 3 (Odemwingie 32, 79, Arnautovic 69)
West Ham 1 (Carroll 5) Att: 27,015

Sunderland 0
Crystal Palace 0 Att: 43,636

Swansea 1 (Lamah 2)
West Bromwich 2 (Sessegnon 52, Mulumbu 85) Att: 20,703

Sunday, March 16

Manchester United 0
Liverpool 3 (Gerrard pen 34, pen 46, Suarez 84) Att: 75,225

Tottenham 0
Arsenal 1 (Rosicky 2) Att: 35,711

Saturday, March 22

Cardiff 3 (Mutch 9, 88, Campbell 25)
Liverpool 6 (Suarez 16, 60, 90+6, Skrtel 41, 54, Sturridge 75) Att: 28,018

Chelsea 6 (Eto'o 5, Schurrle 7, Hazard pen 17, Oscar 42, 66, Salah 71)
Arsenal 0 Att: 41,614

Everton 3 (Baines pen 20, Lukaku 53, Barkley 58)
Swansea 2 (Bony 33, Williams 90+2) Att: 36,260

Hull 2 (Rosenior 31, Long 38)
West Bromwich 0 Att: 23,486

Manchester City 5 (Toure pen 26, pen 54, 65, Fernandinho 84, Demichelis 88)
Fulham 0 Att: 47,262

Newcastle 1 (Cisse 90+4)
Crystal Palace 0 Att: 51,588

Norwich 2 (Snodgrass 20, Tettey 32)
Sunderland 0 Att: 26,654

West Ham 0
Manchester United 2 (Rooney 8, 33) Att: 34,237

Sunday, March 23

Aston Villa 1 (Benteke 5)
Stoke 4 (Odemwingie 22, Crouch 26, N'Zonzi 42, Cameron 90) Att: 30,292

Tottenham 3 (Eriksen 31, 46, Sigurdsson 90+2)
Southampton 2 (Rodriguez 19, Lallana 28) Att: 35,460

Tuesday, March 25

Arsenal 2 (Podolski 73, Giroud 74)
Swansea 2 (Bony 11, Flamini og 90) Att: 59,937

Manchester United 0
Manchester City 3 (Dzeko 1, 56, Toure 90) Att: 75,203

Newcastle 0
Everton 3 (Barkley 22, Lukaku 52, Osman 87) Att: 47,622

Wednesday, March 26

Liverpool 2 (Gerrard 39, Sturridge 48)
Sunderland 1 (Ki 76) Att: 44,524

West Ham 2 (Noble pen 26, Chester og 54)
Hull 1 (Jelavic 48) Att: 31,033

Saturday, March 29

Arsenal 1 (Flamini 53)
Manchester City 1 (Silva 18) Att: 60,060

Crystal Palace 1 (Terry og 52)
Chelsea 0 Att: 25,166

Manchester United 4 (Rooney 20, pen 45, Mata 57, Hernandez 90+1)
Aston Villa 1 (Westwood 13) Att: 75,368

Southampton 4 (Rodriguez 45+1, 89, Lambert 49, Lallana 70)
Newcastle 0 Att: 31,360

Stoke 1 (Odemwingie 62)
Hull 0 Att: 27,029

Swansea 3 (De Guzman 30, 38, Routledge 75)
Norwich 0 Att: 20,371

West Bromwich 3 (Amalfitano 2, Dorrans 9, Bifouma 90+4)
Cardiff 3 (Mutch 30, Caulker 73, Daehli 90+5) Att: 25,661

Sunday, March 30

Fulham 1 (Dejagah 71)
Everton 3 (Stockdale og 50, Mirallas 79, Naismith 87) Att: 25,454

Liverpool 4 (Kaboul og 2, Suarez 25, Coutinho 55, Henderson 75)
Tottenham 0 Att: 44,762

Monday, March 31

Sunderland 1 (Johnson 65)
West Ham 2 (Carroll 9, Diame 50) Att: 37,396

ENGLAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	32	22	5	5	88	39	71
Chelsea	32	21	6	5	62	24	69
Man City	30	21	4	5	80	28	67
Arsenal	32	19	7	6	56	37	64
Everton	31	17	9	5	49	31	60
Tottenham	32	17	5	10	40	44	56
Man United	32	16	6	10	52	38	54
Southampton	32	13	9	10	49	40	48
Newcastle	32	14	4	14	38	47	46
Stoke	32	10	10	12	37	45	40
West Ham	32	10	7	15	36	42	37
Aston Villa	31	9	7	15	34	46	34
Swansea	32	8	9	15	45	48	33
Hull	32	9	6	17	33	40	33
Norwich	32	8	8	16	26	51	32
Crystal Palace	31	9	4	18	20	39	31
West Brom	31	5	14	12	36	48	29
Cardiff	32	6	8	18	29	61	26
Sunderland	30	6	7	17	28	48	25
Fulham	32	7	3	22	31	73	24

38-round season (19x2); bottom 3 will be relegated

Leading goalscorers

29 Luis Suarez (Liverpool)
20 Daniel Sturridge (Liverpool)
17 Yaya Toure (Manchester City)
15 Sergio Aguero (Manchester City)
15 Jay Rodriguez (Southampton)
15 Wayne Rooney (Manchester United)

FA CUP

Quarter-finals

Mar 8: Arsenal 4 Everton 1.
Mar 9: Hull 3 Sunderland 0; Manchester City 1 Wigan 2; Sheffield United 2 Charlton 0.

FRANCE

Friday, March 7

Marseille 0
Nice 1 (Eysseric 66) Att: 36,083

Saturday, March 8

Bastia 0
Paris Saint-Germain 3 (Ibrahimovic 6, Lavezzi 19, 88) Att: 14,992

Guingamp 0
Evian TG 1 (Cambon 49) Att: 13,543

Monaco 2 (Berbatov 6, Rodriguez pen 55)
Sochaux 1 (Butin 83) Att: 7,654

Nantes 2 (Gakpe 8, Djordjevic 76)
AC Ajaccio 2 (Mostefa 5, Diarra 90+2) Att: 22,309

Toulouse 3 (Aurier 75, Ben Basat 79, Ben Yedder 88)
Reims 2 (Krychowiak pen 22, De Preville pen 35) Att: 10,401

Valenciennes 2 (Dossevi 54, Waris 76)
Rennes 1 (Toivonen 48) Att: 13,409

Sunday, March 9

Bordeaux 1 (Saivet 8)
Lyon 2 (Bedimo 90+1, Tolisso 90+4) Att: 17,660

Lille 2 (Basa 19, Roux 57)
Montpellier 0 Att: 40,264

Lorient 1 (Aliadiere pen 90)
Saint-Etienne 0 Att: 15,839

Friday, March 14

Reims 1 (Devaux 67)
Marseille 1 (Gignac 80) Att: 20,513

Saturday, March 15

AC Ajaccio 1 (Lasne 8)
Guingamp 2 (Yatabare 13, Beauvue 74) Att: 6,018

Evian TG 0
Valenciennes 1 (Waris 63) Att: 11,172

Lille 0
Nantes 0 Att: 39,328

Nice 2 (Bosetti 5, Maupay 71)
Bastia 0 Att: 24,337

Rennes 2 (Oliveira 68, Doucoure 87)
Toulouse 3 (Toivonen og 14, Chantome 45, Aurier 73) Att: 15,776

Sochaux 2 (Contout 7, Sunzu 79)
Lorient 0 Att: 15,867

Sunday, March 16

Lyon 2 (Briand 32, 78)
Monaco 3 (Germain 4, Rodriguez 27, Berbatov 52) Att: 35,062

Montpellier 1 (Hilton 34)
Bordeaux 1 (Henrique 24) Att: 14,018

Paris Saint-Germain 2 (Ibrahimovic 14, 41)
Saint-Etienne 0 Att: 45,614

Friday, March 21

Lorient 0
Paris Saint-Germain 1 (Thiago Motta 41) Att: 16,116

Saturday, March 22

Bastia 2 (Raspentino 9, Bruno 42)
Reims 0 Att: 12,724

Bordeaux 1 (Jussie pen 63)
Nice 1 (Bosetti 67) Att: 15,175

Marseille 0
Rennes 1 (Doucoure 76) Att: 36,683

Nantes 2 (Gakpe 3, Djidji 21)
Montpellier 1 (Djidji og 34) Att: 32,738

Toulouse 1 (Ben Yedder 56)
Evian TG 1 (Nsikulu 89) Att: 18,002

Valenciennes 2 (Waris 51, pen 72)
AC Ajaccio 3 (Andre 62, Baradji 87, 90) Att: 14,203

Sunday, March 23

Guingamp 0
Lyon 1 (Gomis 46) Att: 15,167

Monaco 1 (Obbadi 4)
Lille 1 (Origi 38) Att: 7,157

Saint-Etienne 3 (Erdinc 46, 89, Tabanou 51)
Sochaux 1 (Butin 66) Att: 32,688

Friday, March 28

Nice 0
Paris Saint-Germain 1 (Kolodziejczak og 52) Att: 35,030

No vote...Rauball

GREECE

Domestic dominance

Olympiakos wrapped up the Super League with five games to spare following a 2-0 win over Panthrakikos. Nelson Haedo Valdez and David Fuster (with a penalty) were on target, while the visitors' Achilleas Sarakatsanos was sent off.

After consecutive defeats – to Panathinaikos and PAOK – coach Michel's side made certain of their fourth successive championship in a game played behind closed doors after previous crowd disturbances.

Super League winner...Michel

HOLLAND

Cocu takes a rest

Assistant coach Ernest Faber has taken charge of PSV while Phillip Cocu recovers from the removal of a tumour on his back. Faber inherited a side who were second in the table after eight straight wins.

KAZAKHSTAN

Aktobe triumph

Defending champions Aktobe got ready for the new season with a 1-0 win over Shakhter Karagandy in the Super Cup.

Saturday, March 29
AC Ajaccio 2 (Faty 4, Mostefa 34)
Toulouse 2 (Sylla 37, Chantome 60) Att: 5,961

Evian TG 1 (Mongongu pen 84)
Monaco 0 Att: 11,820

Montpellier 0
Valenciennes 0 Att: 17,109

Nantes 0
Bordeaux 0 Att: 25,031

Reims 1 (Fortes 49)
Lorient 1 (Aboubakar pen 45+3) Att: 14,546

Sochaux 1 (Sunzu 25)
Marseille 1 (N'Koulou 90) Att: 16,328

Sunday, March 30
Lille 1 (Kalou 90+2)
Guingamp 0 Att: 39,319

Lyon 1 (Lacazette 39)
Saint-Etienne 2 (Erdinc 28, Gradel 74) Att: 36,822

Rennes 3 (Alessandrini 14, Toivonen 28, Makoun 59)
Bastia 0 Att: 18,474

FRANCE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PSG	31	23	7	1	71	18	76
Monaco	31	18	9	4	50	26	63
Lille	31	16	9	6	35	19	57
Saint-Etienne	31	16	6	9	43	28	54
Lyon	31	13	9	9	46	37	48
Marseille	31	12	9	10	40	33	45
Reims	31	11	11	9	39	40	44
Toulouse	31	11	11	9	40	43	44
Bordeaux	31	11	10	10	37	35	43
Bastia	31	11	7	13	33	46	40
Nice	31	11	5	15	27	35	38
Rennes	31	9	10	12	38	37	37
Lorient	31	10	7	14	37	42	37
Nantes	31	10	7	14	27	33	37
Montpellier	31	6	17	8	35	36	35
Guingamp	31	9	8	14	28	32	35
Evian TG	31	8	10	13	30	45	34
Valenciennes	31	7	8	16	32	49	29
Sochaux	31	6	8	17	27	54	26
AC Ajaccio	31	3	10	18	30	57	19

38-round season (19x2); bottom 3 will be relegated

Leading goalscorers
25 Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Paris Saint-Germain)
14 Edinson Cavani (Paris Saint-Germain)
14 Alexandre Lacazette (Lyon)
13 Vincent Aboubakar (Lorient)
13 Andre-Pierre Gignac (Marseille)

FRENCH CUP

Quarter-finals
Mar 25: Moulins 0 Angers 0 (aet, Angers 4-2 on pens).
Mar 26: Cannes 0 Guingamp 2; Monaco 6 Lens 0.
Mar 27: Rennes 2 Lille 0.

GERMANY

Saturday, March 8
Hamburg 1 (Calhanoglu pen 72)
Eintracht Frankfurt 1 (Madlung 29) Att: 51,191

Hanover 1 (Rudnevs 33)
Bayer Leverkusen 1 (Castro 28) Att: 46,600

Monchengladbach 1 (Raffael 5)
Augsburg 2 (Altintop 35, Werner 81) Att: 49,622

Nuremberg 0
Werder Bremen 2 (Di Santo 40, Bargfrede 68)
Att: 40,608

Schalke 4 (Huntelaar 6, 28, 79, Obasi 55)
Hoffenheim 0 Att: 60,604

Stuttgart 2 (Maxim 30, Harnik 35)
Eintracht Braunschweig 2 (Hochscheidt 24, Bicakcic 82) Att: 59,000

Wolfsburg 1 (Naldo 17)
Bayern Munich 6 (Shaqiri 26, Muller 63, 78, Mandzukic 66, 80, Ribery 71) Att: 30,000

Sunday, March 9
Freiburg 0
Borussia Dortmund 1 (Kehl 58) Att: 24,000

Mainz 1 (Choupo-Moting pen 65)
Hertha Berlin 1 (Ramos 51) Att: 29,760

Friday, March 14
Augsburg 1 (Werner 5)
Schalke 2 (Huntelaar 33, 49) Att: 30,660

Saturday, March 15
Bayern Munich 2 (Mandzukic 44, Schweinsteiger 52)
Bayer Leverkusen 1 (Kiessling 90+1) Att: 71,000

Borussia Dortmund 1 (Jojic 77)
Monchengladbach 2 (Raffael 31, Kruse 40)
Att: 80,645

Eintracht Braunschweig 1 (Bellarabi 48)
Wolfsburg 1 (Luiz Gustavo 36) Att: 23,150

Hertha Berlin 0
Hanover 3 (Stindl 49, Schlaudraff 57, Huszti 90+1)
Att: 46,727

Hoffenheim 2 (Polanski 49, Roberto Firmino 52)
Mainz 4 (Choupo-Moting 67, Saller 73, Okazaki 75, 90+2) Att: 24,741

Werder Bremen 1 (Hunt 79)
Stuttgart 1 (Niedermeier 55) Att: 41,500

Sunday, March 16
Eintracht Frankfurt 1 (Joselu 59)
Freiburg 4 (Schuster 34, Guede 54, 90+3, Klaus 70) Att: 45,400

Hamburg 2 (Calhanoglu 80, Frantz og 86)
Nuremberg 1 (Drmic 90+1) Att: 52,183

Friday, March 21
Freiburg 3 (Schuster 15, Klaus 53, Mehmedi 59)
Werder Bremen 1 (Petersen 70) Att: 24,000

Saturday, March 22
Hanover 0
Borussia Dortmund 3 (Hummels 43, Lewandowski 52, Reus 90+1) Att: 49,000

Mainz 0
Bayern Munich 2 (Schweinsteiger 82, Gotze 86)
Att: 34,000

Monchengladbach 3 (Arango 28, Kruse 32, Raffael 40)
Hertha Berlin 0 Att: 53,050

Schalke 3 (Goretzka 17, Huntelaar 65, Szalai 90+3)
Eintracht Braunschweig 1 (Kessel 82) Att: 61,973

Stuttgart 1 (Maxim 69)
Hamburg 0 Att: 55,000

Wolfsburg 1 (Olic 81)
Augsburg 1 (Werner 43) Att: 25,645

Sunday, March 23
Bayer Leverkusen 2 (Kiessling 39, Rolfes 54)
Hoffenheim 3 (Salihovic pen 14, Volland 40, Modeste 89) Att: 28,794

Nuremberg 2 (Drmic 64, Campana 72)
Eintracht Frankfurt 5 (Barnetta 21, Joselu 49, 88, Madlung 53, Kadlec 90+2) Att: 40,079

Tuesday, March 25
Borussia Dortmund 0
Schalke 0 Att: 77,600

Eintracht Braunschweig 3 (Kumbela 18, 77, Nielsen 45+3)
Mainz 1 (N Muller 20) Att: 21,880

Hertha Berlin 1 (Ramos pen 66)
Bayern Munich 3 (Kroos 6, Gotze 14, Ribery 79)
Att: 76,197

Werder Bremen 1 (Prodl 16)
Wolfsburg 3 (Junior Malanda 2, Perisic 10, Arnold 80) Att: 37,270

Wednesday, March 26
Augsburg 1 (Werner 59)
Bayer Leverkusen 3 (Kiessling 11, Son 80, Can 83) Att: 27,114

Eintracht Frankfurt 1 (Joselu 16)
Monchengladbach 0 Att: 48,000

Hamburg 1 (Lasogga 55)
Freiburg 1 (Darida 50) Att: 44,629

Hoffenheim 3 (Polanski 13, Modeste 51, Rudy 90+3)
Hanover 1 (Andreasen 10) Att: 21,319

Nuremberg 2 (Drmic 43, 54)
Stuttgart 0 Att: 38,188

Friday, March 28
Schalke 2 (Obasi 16, Huntelaar 46)
Hertha Berlin 0 Att: 61,550

Saturday, March 29
Bayer Leverkusen 1 (Kiessling pen 53)
Eintracht Braunschweig 1 (Reichel 47)
Att: 30,210

Bayern Munich 3 (Pizarro 31, 40, Shaqiri 34)
Hoffenheim 3 (Modeste 23, Salihovic 44, Roberto Firmino 75) Att: 71,000

Freiburg 3 (Krmas 23, Mehmedi pen 53, Klaus 65)
Nuremberg 2 (Pogatetz 7, Drmic pen 45) Att: 24,000

Mainz 3 (Bungert 23, Hitz og 38, Geis 83)
Augsburg 0 Att: 30,014

Stuttgart 2 (Gentner 9, Harnik 19)
Borussia Dortmund 3 (Reus 30, pen 68, 83)
Att: 59,500

RANKINGS ON MARCH 31 (morning)

POS		TEAM	GOALS	FACTOR	PTS
1	Luis Suarez	Liverpool (Eng)	29	2	58
2	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid (Spa)	28	2	56
3	Diego Costa	Atletico Madrid (Spa)	25	2	50
4	Lionel Messi	Barcelona (Spa)	23	2	46
5	Daniel Sturridge	Liverpool (Eng)	20	2	40
6	Jonatan Soriano	Salzburg (Aut)	26	1.5	39
7	Alfred Finnbogason	Heerenveen (Hol)	25	1.5	37.5
	Zlatan Ibrahimovic	Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)	25	1.5	37.5
9	Alan	Salzburg (Aut)	24	1.5	36
	Carlos Tevez	Juventus (Ita)	18	2	36
11	Karim Benzema	Real Madrid (Spa)	17	2	34
	Ciro Immobile	Torino (Ita)	17	2	34
	Mario Mandzukic	Bayern Munich (Ger)	17	2	34
	Alexis Sanchez	Barcelona (Spa)	17	2	34
	Yaya Toure	Manchester City (Eng)	17	2	34

LATVIA

Off to a great start

Newly formed FK Liepaja took the place of Liepaja Metalurgs when this season's Virsliga kicked off after the two-time national champions resigned from the league.

The new club began life with a 2-1 win against Metta/LU, but Vladislavs Kozlovs – who joined Jelgava from defending champions Ventspils in the close season – made an even better start, scoring a hat-trick in his new side's 3-1 win at Jurmala.

Match winner...Bukharov

RUSSIA

Anzhi win at last

Anzhi collected their first three points of the campaign, beating Rubin Kazan 1-0 as the Russian Premier League restarted after the winter break. Aleksandr Bukharov scored the only goal of the game as Anzhi finally won at the 20th time of asking.

SCOTLAND

Celtic march on

Celtic won their 45th league championship, with their 5-1 win at Partick Thistle making it the earliest that the domestic title has been secured since Rangers won the league on March 16 in the 1928-29 season.

Rangers, meanwhile, continued their climb back to the top flight of Scottish football as they beat Airdrie 3-0. A hat-trick from Lee McCulloch wrapped up the third-tier title with eight games to spare.

Success means a

Wolfsburg 2 (Olic 69, Naldo 89)
Eintracht Frankfurt 1 (Aigner 11) Att: 29,159

Sunday, March 30

Hanover 1 (Huszti 43)
Werder Bremen 2 (Di Santo 57, Prodl 90)
Att: 49,000

Monchengladbach 3 (Daems 37, Raffael 75, Dominguez 78)
Hamburg 1 (Zoua 28) Att: 53,650

GERMANY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bayern (C)	28	25	3	0	82	16	78
Dortmund	28	17	4	7	62	31	55
Schalke	28	16	6	6	53	37	54
Leverkusen	28	15	3	10	47	34	48
Wolfsburg	28	14	5	9	48	42	47
M'gladbach	28	13	6	9	49	34	45
Mainz	28	13	5	10	41	43	44
Augsburg	28	11	6	11	40	43	39
Hoffenheim	28	9	9	10	63	62	36
Hertha	28	10	6	12	36	39	36
Frankfurt	28	8	8	12	35	48	32
Werder	28	8	8	12	33	54	32
Hanover	28	8	5	15	36	51	29
Freiburg	28	7	8	13	33	50	29
Nuremberg	28	5	11	12	34	52	26
Stuttgart	28	6	6	16	42	57	24
Hamburg	28	6	6	16	43	59	24
Braunschweig	28	5	7	16	25	50	22

34-round season (17x2); bottom 2 will be relegated, 3rd bottom will enter rel/prom play-off

Leading goalscorers

17 Mario Mandzukic (Bayern Munich)
16 Josip Drmic (Nuremberg)
16 Robert Lewandowski (Borussia Dortmund)
16 Adrian Ramos (Hertha Berlin)

GREECE

Mar 8: OFI 1 Giannina 1; Xanthi 0 Asteras 1; Panathinaikos 4 Aris 1.
Mar 9: Atromitos 4 Panionios 0; Apollon 3 Platanias 1; Levadiakos 2 Panetolikos 1; Panthrakikos 2 Ergotelis 1; PAOK 2 Olympiakos 1.
Mar 10: Kalloni 0 Veria 3.
Mar 15: Veria 1 Atromitos 1; OFI 2 Apollon 0; Olympiakos 2 Panthrakikos 0.
Mar 16: Giannina 0 Panathinaikos 1; Asteras 2 Ergotelis 3; Panionios 4 Levadiakos 2; Platanias 7 Kalloni 0; Aris 1 PAOK 1.
Mar 17: Panetolikos 1 Xanthi 0.
Mar 22: Panetolikos 0 Asteras 1; Panthrakikos 2 Aris 1; Panathinaikos 3 Apollon 1.
Mar 23: PAOK 2 Giannina 1; Xanthi 2 Panionios 0; Levadiakos 2 Veria 0; Atromitos 3 Platanias 0; Kalloni 1 OFI 0; Ergotelis 1 Olympiakos 4.
Mar 26: Veria 3 Xanthi 2; Platanias 2 Levadiakos 0; Panionios 1 Panetolikos 1; Aris 0 Ergotelis 2; OFI 2 Atromitos 0; Asteras 2 Olympiakos 1; Panathinaikos 3 Kalloni 0.
Mar 27: Giannina 1 Panthrakikos 1; Apollon 3 PAOK 3.
Mar 29: Panetolikos 0 Veria 0; Panionios 3 Asteras 0; Atromitos 0 Panathinaikos 0.
Mar 30: PAOK 2 Kalloni 1; Ergotelis 1 Giannina 0; Panthrakikos 2 Apollon 3; Levadiakos 2 OFI 1; Olympiakos 1 Aris 0.
Mar 31: Xanthi 2 Platanias 3.

GREECE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Olympiakos (C)	32	27	2	3	87	17	83
PAOK	32	20	6	6	64	34	66
Atromitos	32	18	9	5	51	22	63
Panathinaikos	32	19	6	7	53	24	63
Asteras	32	16	9	7	44	32	57
OFI	32	10	11	11	27	36	41
Ergotelis	32	10	11	11	36	39	41
Panthrakikos	32	11	8	13	38	47	41
Levadiakos	32	12	3	17	38	56	39
Panetolikos	32	10	9	13	31	32	39
Panionios	32	10	8	14	32	40	38
Giannina	32	11	4	17	32	43	37
Kalloni	32	11	3	18	29	59	36
Xanthi	32	10	5	17	39	50	35
Platanias	32	9	7	16	38	48	34
Apollon	32	8	9	15	42	53	33
Veria	32	7	11	14	28	50	32
Aris (R)	32	3	11	18	24	51	20

34-round season (17x2); bottom 2 will be relegated, 3rd bottom will enter rel/prom play-off

HOLLAND

Mar 8: Roda JC 3 NEC 1; AZ 4 Heracles 0; PSV 1 Utrecht 0; Heerenveen 3 Zwolle 0; NAC 1 Vitesse 2.
Mar 9: RKC 1 Den Haag 1; Groningen 0 Feyenoord 2; Go Ahead Eagles 1 Twente 0; Ajax 1 Cambuur 1.
Mar 14: Cambuur 3 RKC 2.
Mar 15: Vitesse 1 PSV 2; Heracles 2 Roda JC 1; Den Haag 2 Groningen 1.
Mar 16: Twente 2 AZ 1; Zwolle 2 Go Ahead Eagles 0; NEC 2 Utrecht 2; Feyenoord 2 Heerenveen 0; NAC 0 Ajax 0.
Mar 22: Groningen 3 Vitesse 1; Heerenveen 2 NEC 2; PSV 3 Roda JC 1.
Mar 23: AZ 2 Zwolle 1.
Mar 28: NAC 2 Utrecht 2.
Mar 29: Vitesse 2 Heerenveen 2; NEC 1 Heracles 2; PSV 2 Groningen 3.
Mar 30: Feyenoord 5 Go Ahead Eagles 0; Cambuur 0 AZ 0; Ajax 3 Twente 0; Roda JC 0 RKC 1; Den Haag 1 Zwolle 1.

HOLLAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ajax	29	18	8	3	60	22	62
Feyenoord	29	16	6	7	64	37	54
Vitesse	30	15	8	7	58	40	53
PSV	30	16	5	9	56	39	53
Twente	29	14	10	5	59	32	52
Heerenveen	30	12	9	9	60	50	45
AZ	30	13	5	12	49	44	44
Groningen	30	10	9	11	49	50	39
Zwolle	30	9	11	10	43	43	38
Heracles	29	10	6	13	40	49	36
Cambuur	29	9	8	12	33	38	35
NAC	29	8	10	11	40	45	34
Den Haag	29	9	6	14	34	57	33
Utrecht	29	8	8	13	39	55	32
Go Ahead	29	8	7	14	39	62	31
RKC	29	7	9	13	42	55	30
NEC	30	5	12	13	48	73	27
Roda JC	30	6	7	17	40	62	25

34-round season (17x2); bottom team will be relegated, 2nd & 3rd bottom will enter rel/prom play-offs

ITALY

Saturday, March 8

Catania 1 (Bergessio 62)
Cagliari 1 (Vecino 53) Att: 14,653

Udinese 1 (Di Natale 67)
Milan 0 Att: 22,000

Sunday, March 9

Bologna 0
Sassuolo 0 Att: 21,694

Chievo 2 (Paloschi pen 5, pen 90+3)
Genoa 1 (Gilardino 88) Att: 5,000

Internazionale 1 (Palacio 30)
Torino 0 Att: 43,543

Juventus 1 (Asamoah 42)
Fiorentina 0 Att: 39,105

Lazio 0
Atalanta 1 (Moralez 60) Att: 25,500

Napoli 1 (Callejon 81)
Roma 0 Att: 38,879

Parma 2 (Biabiany 20, Schelotto 90+2)
Verona 0 Att: 14,168

Sampdoria 4 (Krsticic 49, Ceccherini og 53, Okaka Chuka 68, Gabbiadini 75)
Livorno 2 (Mbaye 19, 27) Att: 20,805

Saturday, March 15

Verona 0
Internazionale 2 (Palacio 14, Jonathan 63)
Att: 23,973

Sunday, March 16

Atalanta 3 (Carmona 36, Bonaventura 42, Denis 56)
Sampdoria 0 Att: 14,876

Cagliari 0
Lazio 2 (Lulic 19, Keita 69) Att: 4,798

Fiorentina 3 (Cuadrado 11, Matri 39, Gomez 89)
Chievo 1 (Paloschi 63) Att: 27,767

Genoa 0
Juventus 1 (Pirlo 89) Att: 23,832

Livorno 2 (Benassi 46, Paulinho 53)
Bologna 1 (Christodoulopoulos pen 86) Att: 10,171

Milan 2 (Rami 56, Balotelli pen 76)
Parma 4 (Cassano pen 9, 51, Amauri 78, Biabiany 90+5) Att: 39,249

Sassuolo 3 (Zaza 56, Missiroli 62, Sansone 89)
Catania 1 (Bergessio 30) Att: 12,116

Monday, March 17

Roma 3 (Totti 22, Destro 30, Torosidis 69)
Udinese 2 (Pinzi 51, Basta 80) Att: 34,274

Torino 0
Napoli 1 (Higuain 90) Att: 12,370

Saturday, March 22

Chievo 0
Roma 2 (Gervinho 17, Destro 42) Att: 10,000

Torino 3 (Immobile 25, 60, 67)
Livorno 1 (Siligardi 89) Att: 12,572

Sunday, March 23

Bologna 1 (Christodoulopoulos pen 78)
Cagliari 0 Att: 16,286

Catania 0
Juventus 1 (Tevez 59) Att: 19,945

Internazionale 1 (Icardi 36)
Atalanta 2 (Bonaventura 35, 90) Att: 39,098

Lazio 1 (Gonzalez 61)
Milan 1 (Konko og 43) Att: 27,800

Napoli 0
Fiorentina 1 (Joaquin 87) Att: 46,522

Parma 1 (Schelotto 31)
Genoa 1 (Cofie 21) Att: 12,441

Sampdoria 5 (Sansone 4, Renan 23, Soriano 38, 48, Palombo 58)
Verona 0 Att: 20,853

Udinese 1 (Di Natale 26)
Sassuolo 0 Att: 12,431

Tuesday, March 25

Roma 2 (Destro 41, Florenzi 90+2)
Torino 1 (Immobile 52) Att: 31,979

Wednesday, March 26

Atalanta 2 (De Luca 22, Denis 59)
Livorno 0 Att: 12,991

Cagliari 1 (Nene 31)
Verona 0 Att: 5,000

Catania 2 (Monzon 52, Gyomber 75)
Napoli 4 (Zapata 16, 43, Callejon 25, Henrique 40)
Att: 13,513

Chievo 3 (Paloschi pen 7, 78, Rigoni 89)
Bologna 0 Att: 6,100

Fiorentina 0
Milan 2 (Mexes 23, Balotelli 64) Att: 32,280

Genoa 2 (Gilardino 65, Fetfatzidis 83)
Lazio 0 Att: 17,875

Juventus 2 (Tevez 25, 32)
Parma 1 (Molinaro 62) Att: 38,535

Sassuolo 1 (Longhi 16)
Sampdoria 2 (Sansone 1, Okaka Chuka 66)
Att: 11,947

Thursday, March 27

Internazionale 0
Udinese 0 Att: 36,840

Saturday, March 29

Bologna 0
Atalanta 2 (De Luca 22, Estigarribia 26) Att: 20,413

Milan 3 (Balotelli 4, Kaka 27, 54)
Chievo 0 Att: 34,989

Sunday, March 30

Lazio 3 (Lulic 15, Klose 67, Candreva 90+3)
Parma 2 (Biabiany 26, Ciani og 81) Att: 26,531

Napoli 2 (Callejon 37, Mertens 81)
Juventus 0 Att: 46,134

Sampdoria 0
Fiorentina 0 Att: 21,695

Sassuolo 0
Roma 2 (Destro 16, Michel Bastos 90+6)
Att: 10,046

Torino 2 (El Kaddouri 45, Cerci 71)
Cagliari 1 (Nene 77) Att: 13,271

Verona 3 (Donadel 35, Toni 88, 90+4)
Genoa 0 Att: 20,144

second successive promotion for the 54-times champions since they were demoted from the Scottish Premier League to the fourth tier after going into administration and then liquidation in 2012.

Aberdeen ended their 19-year trophy drought by beating Inverness Caledonian Thistle on penalties in the Scottish League Cup Final.

Win...Celtic's Liam Henderson

SPAIN

Barca avoid Real

Barcelona and Real Madrid were kept apart in the UEFA Youth League semi-finals. Barca, who beat Arsenal in the quarters, face Schalke, while Real meet Benfica after beating Paris Saint-Germain.

The Final will be held in Switzerland on April 14.

Valencia's Seydou Keita scored the fastest goal in La Liga history, finding the net against Almeria in just 7.6 seconds.

Semi succes...Real (in white)

WALES

Seventh heaven

Rhys Griffiths became the first player to score seven goals in a Welsh Premier League game as Port Talbot Town won 8-2 away to local rivals Afan Lido.

Monday, March 31

Livorno 2 (Paulinho 54, Emeghara 85)
Internazionale 2 (Hernanes 37, Palacio 45)
Att: 15,450

Udinese 1 (Di Natale 68)
Catania 0 Att: 15,005

ITALY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Juventus	31	26	3	2	67	22	81
Roma	30	21	7	2	58	15	70
Napoli	31	19	7	5	59	32	64
Fiorentina	31	15	7	9	49	33	52
Inter	31	12	13	6	49	33	49
Parma	30	12	11	7	49	37	47
Atalanta	31	14	4	13	37	39	46
Lazio	31	12	9	10	40	40	45
Verona	31	13	4	14	46	52	43
Torino	31	11	9	11	45	40	42
Milan	31	11	9	11	47	43	42
Sampdoria	31	11	8	12	40	43	41
Genoa	31	10	9	12	34	39	39
Udinese	31	11	5	15	34	42	38
Cagliari	31	7	11	13	29	41	32
Chievo	31	7	6	18	26	46	27
Bologna	31	5	11	15	24	48	26
Livorno	31	6	7	18	34	58	25
Sassuolo	31	5	6	20	29	61	21
Catania	31	4	8	19	23	55	20

38-round season (19x2); bottom 3 will be relegated

Leading goalscorers

18 Carlos Tevez (Juventus)
17 Ciro Immobile (Torino)
15 Luca Toni (Verona)
14 Gonzalo Higuain (Napoli)
14 Rodrigo Palacio (Internazionale)
14 Giuseppe Rossi (Fiorentina)

NORWAY

League: 1st matchday

Mar 28: Molde 2 Valerenga 0.
Mar 29: Haugesund 1 Lillestrom 1; Rosenborg 2 Viking 2.
Mar 30: Bodo/Glimt 1 Aalesund 1; Sandnes Ulf 1 Odd 1; Stabaek 3 Sogndal 0; Stromsgodset 4 Start 2; Sarpsborg 3 Brann 0.

POLAND

Regular season

Mar 7: Korona 1 Lechia 0; Zawisza 3 Gornik 1.
Mar 8: Jagiellonia 1 Zaglebie 0; Wisla 0 Ruch 1.
Mar 9: Pogon 0 Cracovia 0; Piast 0 Podbeskidzie 0; Slask 1 Legia 1.
Mar 10: Widzew 2 Lech 2.
Mar 14: Korona 1 Zawisza 1; Lech 2 Podbeskidzie 1.
Mar 15: Lechia 2 Widzew 0; Gornik 1 Pogon 1.
Mar 16: Legia 2 Wisla 2; Zaglebie 2 Slask 2; Ruch 0 Piast 2.
Mar 17: Cracovia 1 Jagiellonia 0.
Mar 21: Widzew 0 Zaglebie 0; Wisla 0 Zawisza 1.
Mar 22: Jagiellonia 1 Korona 1; Lech 2 Lechia 1.
Mar 23: Podbeskidzie 1 Cracovia 1; Pogon 3 Ruch 1; Slask 1 Gornik 1.
Mar 24: Piast 1 Legia 2.
Mar 28: Ruch 0 Podbeskidzie 1; Korona 2 Pogon 2.
Mar 29: Legia 1 Lech 0; Cracovia 1 Widzew 1; Lechia 3 Piast 1.
Mar 30: Zawisza 1 Slask 0; Gornik 3 Jagiellonia 3.
Mar 31: Zaglebie 3 Wisla 1.

POLAND – REGULAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Legia	28	18	3	7	54	29	57
Lech	28	13	8	7	47	33	47
Wisla	28	12	9	7	37	27	45
Ruch	28	12	8	8	35	38	44
Pogon	28	10	13	5	44	36	43
Zawisza	28	11	9	8	43	31	42
Gornik	28	11	9	8	42	41	42
Jagiellonia	28	10	8	10	44	36	38
Lechia	28	9	10	9	36	35	37
Cracovia	28	10	6	12	35	42	36
Korona	28	8	10	10	35	39	34
Piast	28	8	8	12	26	44	32
Slask	28	6	12	10	34	37	30
Zaglebie	28	7	8	13	29	35	29
Podbeskidzie	28	5	12	11	23	36	27
Widzew	28	4	7	17	24	49	19

30-round regular season (15x2); top 8 will form championship group, bottom 8 will form relegation group (from which the bottom 2 will go down)

PORTUGAL

Mar 7: Rio Ave 0 Academica 0.
Mar 8: Braga 2 Nacional 1.
Mar 9: Pacos de Ferreira 0 Gil Vicente 2; Olhanense 0 Belenenses 0; Setubal 2 Sporting 2; Benfica 2 Estoril 0; Porto 4 Arouca 1.
Mar 10: Maritimo 2 Guimaraes 1.
Mar 14: Academica 1 Braga 1.
Mar 15: Gil Vicente 1 Rio Ave 2; Estoril 1 Maritimo 0; Guimaraes 1 Pacos de Ferreira 2.
Mar 16: Belenenses 1 Setubal 3; Arouca 2 Olhanense 0; Sporting 1 Porto 0.
Mar 17: Nacional 2 Benfica 4.
Mar 21: Rio Ave 1 Braga 1.
Mar 22: Guimaraes 0 Gil Vicente 0; Maritimo 1 Sporting 3.
Mar 23: Olhanense 1 Nacional 1; Pacos de Ferreira 3 Arouca 1; Benfica 3 Academica 0; Porto 1 Belenenses 0.
Mar 24: Setubal 1 Estoril 1.
Mar 28: Belenenses 1 Pacos de Ferreira 1.
Mar 29: Sporting 1 Guimaraes 0.
Mar 30: Braga 0 Benfica 1; Arouca 1 Setubal 0; Academica 2 Olhanense 1; Estoril 0 Rio Ave 1; Nacional 2 Porto 1; Gil Vicente 1 Maritimo 1.

PORTUGAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Benfica	25	20	4	1	48	15	64
Sporting	25	17	6	2	47	17	57
Porto	25	15	4	6	45	20	49
Estoril	25	12	7	6	36	24	43
Nacional	25	9	11	5	35	28	38
Braga	25	9	5	11	34	31	32
Academica	25	8	8	9	18	26	32
Guimaraes	25	9	4	12	25	26	31
Rio Ave	25	8	7	10	20	25	31
Maritimo	25	8	7	10	34	40	31
Setubal	25	8	6	11	32	37	30
Gil Vicente	25	7	6	12	22	33	27
Arouca	25	6	7	12	24	36	25
Pacos Ferreira	25	6	5	14	25	46	23
Belenenses	25	3	9	13	13	30	18
Olhanense	25	4	6	15	16	40	18

30-round season (15x2); bottom 2 will be relegated

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Mar 7: UCD 0 Bohemians 3; Limerick 0 Bray 0; Drogheda 4 Dundalk 1; Cork 1 St Patrick's 1.
Mar 8: Sligo 2 Athlone 1.
Mar 9: Shamrock 1 Derry 1.
Mar 14: Bray 1 Sligo 0; Athlone 1 Shamrock 4; Dundalk 2 Limerick 1; St Patrick's 3 UCD 2; Bohemians 2 Drogheda 2.
Mar 16: Derry 0 Cork 1.
Mar 21: Bohemians 1 Shamrock 3; Cork 3 Bray 1; Drogheda 1 Derry 1; UCD 2 Athlone 1.
Mar 22: St Patrick's 1 Limerick 1; Sligo 0 Dundalk 1.
Mar 28: Shamrock 1 Sligo 0; Athlone 0 Cork 3; Bray 3 UCD 5; Derry 0 St Patrick's 0; Dundalk 1 Bohemians 1; Limerick 0 Drogheda 1.

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shamrock	4	3	1	0	9	3	10
Cork	4	3	1	0	8	2	10
Drogheda	4	2	2	0	8	4	8
Dundalk	4	2	1	1	5	6	7
St Patrick's	4	1	3	0	5	4	6
UCD	4	2	0	2	9	10	6
Bohemians	4	1	2	1	7	6	5
Bray	4	1	1	2	5	8	4
Derry	4	0	3	1	2	3	3
Sligo	4	1	0	3	2	4	3
Limerick	4	0	2	2	2	4	2
Athlone	4	0	0	4	3	11	0

33-round season (11x3); bottom team will be relegated, 2nd bottom will enter rel/prom play-off

ROMANIA

Mar 7: Brasov 1 Otelul 3.
Mar 8: Botosani 1 Poli 0; Concordia 1 Universitatea 1; CFR 0 Steaua 1.
Mar 9: Gaz Metan 4 Viitorul 0; Ceahlaul 0 Petrolul 0.
Mar 10: Sageata 0 Vaslui 1; Astra 2 Pandurii 0; Dinamo 1 Corona 0.
Mar 14: Viitorul 0 Sageata 0; Corona 2 CFR 2; Poli 0 Brasov 1.
Mar 15: Universitatea 0 Dinamo 1; Steaua 3 Gaz Metan 0.
Mar 16: Petrolul 1 Astra 1.
Mar 17: Vaslui 0 Botosani 1; Otelul 0 Ceahlaul 1; Pandurii 0 Concordia 1.
Mar 21: Gaz Metan 1 Corona 0; Astra 1 Otelul 1.
Mar 22: Concordia 0 Petrolul 0; Dinamo 2 Pandurii 3.
Mar 23: Botosani 3 Viitorul 1; Sageata 1 Steaua 2.
Mar 24: Poli 0 Vaslui 2; Brasov 1 Ceahlaul 0; CFR 1 Universitatea 2.
Mar 28: Corona 0 Sageata 0; Otelul 2 Concordia 0.
Mar 29: Viitorul 1 Poli 2; Pandurii 0 CFR 1.
Mar 30: Ceahlaul 0 Astra 2; Petrolul 2 Dinamo 2.
Mar 31: Universitatea 1 Gaz Metan 0; Vaslui 1 Brasov 0; Steaua 4 Botosani 0.

ROMANIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Steaua	25	18	7	0	57	15	61
Astra	25	16	5	4	54	22	53
Petrolul	25	12	12	1	35	15	48
Vaslui	25	12	6	7	26	16	42
Dinamo	25	11	7	7	36	24	40
Pandurii	25	11	5	9	45	31	38
CFR	25	8	10	7	31	27	34
Gaz Metan	25	9	6	10	28	27	33
Ceahlaul	25	8	9	8	22	23	33
Botosani	25	9	5	11	24	38	32
Concordia	25	8	7	10	27	33	31
Poli	25	8	5	12	21	30	29
Otelul	25	8	4	13	28	40	28
Universitatea	25	7	6	12	22	38	27
Sageata	25	6	7	12	21	42	25
Brasov	25	5	8	12	23	33	23
Viitorul	25	5	8	12	18	42	23
Corona	25	2	7	16	18	40	13

34-round season (17x2); bottom 4 will be relegated

RUSSIA

Mar 8: Krasnodar 0 Ural 1; Terek 1 Spartak 0.
Mar 9: Dynamo 4 CSKA 2; Anzhi 1 Rubin 0; Zenit 0 Tom 0.
Mar 10: Amkar 5 Volga 1; Lokomotiv 2 Krylia Sovetov 1; Rostov 0 Kuban 0.
Mar 14: Ural 2 Terek 1.
Mar 15: Krylia Sovetov 0 Rostov 2; CSKA 1 Zenit 0; Kuban 1 Dynamo 1.
Mar 16: Amkar 0 Lokomotiv 0; Rubin 3 Volga 1.
Mar 17: Tom 1 Krasnodar 1; Spartak 2 Anzhi 2.
Mar 21: Rostov 3 Amkar 3.
Mar 22: Volga 0 Tom 1; Lokomotiv 3 Ural 0; Krasnodar 4 Spartak 0.
Mar 23: Dynamo 0 Rubin 0; Terek 2 Kuban 1.
Mar 24: Anzhi 0 CSKA 3; Zenit 2 Krylia Sovetov 1.
Mar 29: Ural 2 Anzhi 1; Amkar 1 Zenit 2.
Mar 30: Lokomotiv 0 Spartak 0; Tom 1 Dynamo 3; Rubin 1 Rostov 2; Kuban 1 Krasnodar 3.
Mar 31: CSKA 3 Volga 0.

RUSSIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lokomotiv	23	14	6	3	42	17	48
Zenit	23	14	5	4	44	23	47
CSKA	23	13	4	6	33	23	43
Dynamo	23	12	7	4	40	25	43
Spartak	23	12	5	6	39	27	41
Krasnodar	23	12	4	7	38	27	40
Amkar	23	9	8	6	31	26	35
Rostov	23	8	8	7	30	28	32
Rubin	23	6	10	7	25	18	28
Kuban	23	6	8	9	28	32	26
Krylia Sovetov	22	5	9	8	22	29	24
Ural	23	5	6	12	21	42	21
Tom	23	5	5	13	16	32	20
Terek	22	4	7	11	17	26	19
Volga	23	5	3	15	19	49	18
Anzhi	23	1	9	13	16	37	12

30-round season (15x2); bottom 2 will be relegated, 3rd & 4th bottom will enter rel/prom play-offs

Leading goalscorers

13 Seydou Doumbia (CSKA)
13 Artem Dzyuba (Rostov)
12 Yura Movsisyan (Spartak)
12 Dame N'Doye (Lokomotiv)
11 Hulk (Zenit)
10 Danny (Zenit)

SCOTLAND

Regular season

Mar 8: Kilmarnock 4 Hearts 2; Hibernian 3 Motherwell 3.
Mar 12: Inverness 0 Hibernian 0; Dundee United 0 St Johnstone 1.
Mar 14: Kilmarnock 0 Celtic 3.
Mar 15: Dundee United 3 St Mirren 2; Partick 3 Hibernian 1; St Johnstone 0 Ross County 1.
Mar 19: Motherwell 2 Inverness 0.
Mar 21: Hearts 1 Dundee United 2.
Mar 22: Aberdeen 2 Kilmarnock 1; Celtic 3 St Mirren 0; Inverness 1 Partick 0; Motherwell 2 Ross County 1; St Johnstone 2 Hibernian 0.
Mar 25: Ross County 1 Aberdeen 1; St Mirren 0 St Johnstone 1.
Mar 26: Dundee United 2 Inverness 1; Partick 1 Celtic 5.
Mar 29: Aberdeen 1 Dundee United 1; Celtic 1 Ross County 1; Inverness 2 St Mirren 2; Motherwell 1 Kilmarnock 2; St Johnstone 1 Partick 1.
Mar 30: Hearts 2 Hibernian 0.

First...Nacional (left) and Remo

BRAZIL

Stadium opens

The Arena Amazonia in Manaus, which will host four group-stage fixtures during the World Cup, was inaugurated with a 2-2 draw between Nacional and visitors Remo.

COLOMBIA

Quickest cup red

Atletico Nacional midfielder Alejandro Bernal lasted just 25 seconds of his side's Libertadores Cup game against Nacional before receiving the fastest red card in the competition's history.

Despite losing Bernal, who was dismissed for stamping on the ankle of the Uruguayan side's midfielder Maximiliano Calzada, Atletico managed to recover from being 2-0 down at half-time to force a 2-2 draw.

MEXICO

Santos go through

Santos Laguna became the first team to qualify for the knockout stage of this year's Libertadores Cup when they came from a goal down to beat Uruguayan champions

3 remaining Major League Soccer clubs in the quarter-finals of the CONCACAF Champions League all lost to Mexican opposition

SCOTLAND – REGULAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Celtic (C)	32	27	4	1	80	16	85
Aberdeen	31	18	5	8	44	29	59
Motherwell	31	18	3	10	51	46	57
Dundee Utd	32	15	9	8	57	38	54
Inverness	31	14	7	10	37	32	49
St Johnstone	32	13	6	13	39	33	45
Hibernian	32	8	10	14	29	42	34
Kilmarnock	32	9	6	17	40	55	33
Ross County	32	8	7	17	37	54	31
Partick	32	6	12	14	34	53	30
St Mirren	32	7	7	18	31	53	28
Hearts[1]	31	6	6	19	28	56	9

33-round regular season (11x3); top 6 will form championship group, bottom 6 will form relegation group (from which the bottom team will go down and the 2nd bottom will enter rel/prom play-offs)
[1]15pts deducted for going into administration

LEAGUE CUP

Final

Mar 16 - Glasgow (Celtic Park)
Aberdeen 0
Inverness 0
Aet. Aberdeen 4-2 on pens
Att: 51,143. **Ref:** McLean

SPAIN

Saturday, March 8

Betis 2 (Leo Baptistao 16, Ruben Castro 39)
Getafe 0 Att: 30,264

Celta Vigo 0
Atletico Madrid 2 (Villa 62, 64) Att: 24,539

Granada 2 (Fran Rico pen 23, El Arabi 33)
Villarreal 0 Att: 13,612

Valladolid 1 (Rossi 17)
Barcelona 0 Att: 22,921

Sunday, March 9

Almeria 1 (Aleix Vidal 85)
Sevilla 3 (Bacca 31, Carrico 51, Gameiro 77)
Att: 12,000

Espanyol 3 (David Lopez 2, Colotto 21, Pizzi 58)
Elche 1 (Fuentes og 88) Att: 20,825

Real Madrid 3 (Cristiano Ronaldo 11, Marcelo 49, Karabelas og 81)
Levante 0 Att: 74,172

Valencia 1 (Alcacer 23)
Athletic Bilbao 1 (Aduriz pen 53) Att: 40,000

Monday, March 10

Osasuna 0
Malaga 2 (Samuel 14, Amrabat 66) Att: 15,300

Real Sociedad 2 (Inigo Martinez 2, Ruben Pardo 45)
Rayo Vallecano 3 (Larrivey pen 4, Bueno 47, Rochina 67) Att: 15,344

Friday, March 14

Getafe 3 (Marica 6, Lopez 38, Lafita 72)
Granada 3 (Riki 35, El Arabi 62, 77) Att: 8,700

Saturday, March 15

Atletico Madrid 1 (Diego Costa 55)
Espanyol 0 Att: 45,000

Levante 0
Celta Vigo 1 (Nolito 19) Att: 14,888

Malaga 0
Real Madrid 1 (Cristiano Ronaldo 23) Att: 29,265

Rayo Vallecano 3 (Bueno 38, Larrivey 57, 77)
Almeria 1 (Soriano 72) Att: 11,500

Sunday, March 16

Barcelona 7 (Messi 19, 63, 88, Sanchez 22, Iniesta 34, Tello 78, Pedro 90)
Osasuna 0 Att: 71,764

Elche 0
Betis 0 Att: 21,000

Real Sociedad 1 (Agirretxe 61)
Valencia 0 Att: 23,845

Sevilla 4 (Rakitic pen 23, Gameiro 41, pen 66, Figueiras 74)
Valladolid 1 (Javi Guerra 76) Att: 29,700

Monday, March 17

Villarreal 1 (Pina 47)
Athletic Bilbao 1 (Aduriz 83) Att: 18,000

Friday, March 21

Celta Vigo 0
Malaga 2 (Camacho 24, 32) Att: 17,400

Saturday, March 22

Athletic Bilbao 1 (Susaeta 40)
Getafe 0 Att: 33,200

Espanyol 0
Levante 0 Att: 19,665

Granada 1 (Brahimi 63)
Elche 0 Att: 18,231

Valladolid 1 (Ze Castro og 7)
Rayo Vallecano 1 (Bueno 44) Att: 18,670

Sunday, March 23

Betis 0
Atletico Madrid 2 (Gabi 58, Diego Costa 64)
Att: 31,132

Osasuna 1 (Acuna 90+4)
Sevilla 2 (Jairo 27, Bacca pen 45+1) Att: 14,162

Real Madrid 3 (Benzema 20, 24, Cristiano Ronaldo pen 55)
Barcelona 4 (Iniesta 7, Messi 42, pen 65, pen 84)
Att: 85,454

Valencia 2 (Javi Fuego 35, 44)
Villarreal 1 (Dos Santos 83) Att: 37,214

Monday, March 24

Almeria 4 (Oscar Diaz 29, Verza pen 66, pen 71, Hicham 90+1)
Real Sociedad 3 (Vela pen 21, Agirretxe 58, Bergara 85) Att: 7,051

Tuesday, March 25

Elche 0
Athletic Bilbao 0 Att: 24,752

Malaga 1 (Perez 34)
Espanyol 2 (Sergio Garcia 33, Pizzi 76) Att: 25,000

Wednesday, March 26

Atletico Madrid 1 (Diego Costa 63)
Granada 0 Att: 41,200

Barcelona 3 (Neymar 6, 67, Messi 30)
Celta Vigo 0 Att: 67,162

Rayo Vallecano 1 (Larrivey pen 90)
Osasuna 0 Att: 10,330

Sevilla 2 (Bacca 19, 72)
Real Madrid 1 (Cristiano Ronaldo 14) Att: 43,000

Thursday, March 27

Almeria 2 (Oscar Diaz 53, Corona 55)
Valencia 2 (Keita 1, Vargas 34) Att: 11,215

Getafe 0
Villarreal 1 (Perbet 5) Att: 6,000

Levante 1 (Diop 26)
Betis 3 (Salva Sevilla 13, Jorge Molina 70, Ruben Castro 77) Att: 10,115

Real Sociedad 1 (Vela 23)
Valladolid 0 Att: 21,125

Saturday, March 29

Athletic Bilbao 1 (Muniain 6)
Atletico Madrid 2 (D Costa 22, Koke 55) Att: 35,650

Celta Vigo 1 (Nolito pen 87)
Sevilla 0 Att: 19,366

Espanyol 0
Barcelona 1 (Messi pen 77) Att: 31,666

Real Madrid 5 (Cristiano Ronaldo 15, Carvajal 55, Bale 68, 70, Morata 78)
Rayo Vallecano 0 Att: 56,674

Sunday, March 30

Osasuna 1 (Oriol Riera 59)
Real Sociedad 1 (Castro 7) Att: 14,137

Valencia 1 (Vargas 7)
Getafe 3 (Lafita 25, Marica 27, P Leon 88) Att: 32,300

Valladolid 1 (Manucho 6)
Almeria 0 Att: 15,585

Villarreal 1 (Jonathan 43)
Elche 1 (Suarez pen 31) Att: 15,172

Monday, March 31

Betis 1 (Reyes 30)
Malaga 2 (Juanmi 83, Darder 87) Att: 34,300

Granada 0
Levante 2 (D Navarro 48, P Lopez 88) Att: 15,500

SPAIN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico	31	24	4	3	69	22	76
Barcelona	31	24	3	4	89	25	75
Real Madrid	31	23	4	4	86	32	73
Athletic	31	16	8	7	53	34	56
Sevilla	31	14	8	9	55	46	50
Sociedad	31	14	8	9	54	44	50
Villarreal	31	14	7	10	51	37	49
Valencia	31	11	7	13	44	45	40
Espanyol	31	11	7	13	34	36	40
Levante	31	10	10	11	29	38	40
Celta	31	10	6	15	34	44	36
Malaga	31	9	8	14	31	39	35
Granada	31	10	4	17	28	42	34
Rayo	31	10	3	18	34	68	33
Elche	31	7	11	13	25	42	32
Getafe	31	8	7	16	29	48	31
Valladolid	31	6	12	13	32	50	30
Almeria	31	8	6	17	33	58	30
Osasuna	31	8	6	17	26	52	30
Betis	31	5	7	19	27	61	22

38-round season (19x2); bottom 3 will be relegated

Leading goalscorers

28 Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid)
25 Diego Costa (Atletico Madrid)
23 Lionel Messi (Barcelona)
17 Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)
17 Alexis Sanchez (Barcelona)
15 Antoine Griezmann (Real Sociedad)

SWEDEN

League: 1st matchday

Mar 30: Brommapojkarna 1 Kalmar 2; Mjallby 2 Gefle 2; Malmo 3 Falkenberg 0; Halmstad 1 Orebro 2.
Mar 31: Atvidaberg 2 Elfsborg 1; Hacken 2 Norrkoping 0; AIK 0 Gothenburg 2.

SWITZERLAND

Mar 8: Grasshopper 2 Lausanne 1; Basle 1 St Gallen 1.
Mar 9: Aarau 1 Thun 4; Young Boys 1 Zurich 3; Sion 3 Lucerne 2.
Mar 12: Sion 1 Aarau 2.
Mar 15: St Gallen 1 Young Boys 1; Thun 2 Lausanne 2.
Mar 16: Grasshopper 4 Sion 2; Lucerne 1 Zurich 0; Basle 5 Aarau 0.
Mar 22: St Gallen 1 Thun 0; Aarau 2 Sion 0.
Mar 23: Lausanne 1 Lucerne 0; Zurich 0 Basle 0; Young Boys 0 Grasshopper 4.
Mar 29: Sion 1 St Gallen 1; Aarau 2 Young Boys 1.
Mar 30: Zurich 0 Lausanne 3; Thun 1 Grasshopper 3; Lucerne 0 Basle 2.

SWITZERLAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Basle	27	13	13	1	50	24	52
Grasshopper	27	14	7	6	50	29	49
Young Boys	27	12	5	10	44	39	41
Zurich	27	12	5	10	39	36	41
Lucerne	27	11	6	10	34	38	39
St Gallen	27	9	10	8	29	32	37
Thun	27	9	8	10	41	41	35
Aarau	27	10	4	13	41	53	34
Sion	27	6	6	15	27	40	24
Lausanne	27	6	2	19	30	53	20

36-round season (9x4); bottom team will be relegated

TURKEY

Mar 8: Elazigspor 0 Kasimpasa 0; Bursaspor 1 Karabukspor 0; Kayseri Erciyesspor 1 Konyaspor 0; Galatasaray 6 Akhisar 1.
Mar 9: Gaziantepspor 2 Kayserispor 1; Genclerbirligi 2 Sivasspor 1; Antalyaspor 1 Rizespor 2; Besiktas 1 Eskisehirspor 0.
Mar 14: Karabukspor 0 Galatasaray 0.
Mar 15: Kasimpasa 1 Genclerbirligi 2; Akhisar 0 Antalyaspor 0; Rizespor 2 Besiktas 2.
Mar 16: Konyaspor 0 Gaziantepspor 1; Eskisehirspor 1 Elazigspor 0; Sivasspor 0 Trabzonspor 4; Fenerbahce 2 Kayseri Erciyesspor 1.
Mar 17: Kayserispor 2 Bursaspor 0.
Mar 21: Trabzonspor 0 Kasimpasa 0.
Mar 22: Rizespor 0 Eskisehirspor 0; Bursaspor 1 Konyaspor 2; Galatasaray 0 Kayserispor 1; Antalyaspor 0 Karabukspor 0.
Mar 23: Genclerbirligi 3 Elazigspor 1; Kayseri Erciyesspor 1 Sivasspor 1; Besiktas 3 Akhisar 0.
Mar 24: Gaziantepspor 0 Fenerbahce 3.
Mar 28: Kasimpasa 3 Kayseri Erciyesspor 0; Karabukspor 1 Besiktas 0.
Mar 29: Sivasspor 3 Gaziantepspor 2; Elazigspor 0 Trabzonspor 0; Akhisar 2 Rizespor 3; Konyaspor 0 Galatasaray 0.
Mar 31: Kayserispor 3 Antalyaspor 1; Eskisehirspor 0 Genclerbirligi 1; Fenerbahce 3 Bursaspor 0.

Through...Renteria (left) of Santos in action against Penarol

Penarol 4-1. Carlos Quintero (twice), Javier Orozco and Andres Renteria were on target after Javier Toledo had scored for the visitors.

USA

Official lock out

This year's MLS got underway without any top-flight referees in charge of matches after the officials would not agree to a no-strike clause and were subsequently replaced by replacements.

"We have no choice," said MLS commissioner Don Garber. "The professional referee's organisation had to replace those referees so we could have these games. The last thing we wanted to do was lock out those referees."

The dispute ended with the signing of a new five-year deal between the league and officials' representatives.

GHANA

Assistant ref killed

Kyei Andoh, a 21-year-old assistant referee, died days after being assaulted at a lower-league match in Ghana's Western Region in which he was officiating.

TURKEY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fenerbahce	26	19	3	4	59	27	60
Galatasaray	27	13	11	3	47	22	50
Besiktas	27	14	8	5	45	25	50
Sivasspor	27	12	4	11	46	46	40
Kasimpasa	27	10	9	8	42	32	39
Trabzonspor	26	10	9	7	36	29	39
Karabukspor	27	10	9	8	26	25	39
Eskisehirspor	27	10	7	10	28	26	37
Genclerbirligi	27	11	4	12	33	34	37
Akhisar	27	10	6	11	35	42	36
Gaziantepspor	27	10	5	12	32	46	35
Bursaspor	27	9	7	11	28	37	34
Konyaspor	27	9	5	13	35	37	32
Rizespor	27	7	9	11	33	38	30
Elazigspor	27	8	4	15	33	51	28
Antalyaspor	27	5	12	10	28	33	27
K Erciyesspor	27	7	5	15	27	42	26
Kayserispor	27	6	7	14	22	43	25

34-round season (17x2); bottom 3 will be relegated

UKRAINE

Mar 15: Metalurh Donetsk 1 Illichivets 1; Karpaty 0 Volyn 1; Dnipro 3 Sevastopol 0.
Mar 16: Vorskla 1 Zorya 1; Metalurh Zaporizhya 0 Shakhtar 3; Tavriya 1 Dynamo 2; Metalist 1 Hoverla 1.
Mar 22: Shakhtar 0 Dnipro 2; Chornomorets 0 Tavriya 0; Dynamo 4 Metalurh Zaporizhya 0.
Mar 23: Zorya 0 Metalurh Donetsk 4; Volyn 0 Vorskla 0; Hoverla 1 Karpaty 0.
Mar 28: Metalurh Zaporizhya 1 Tavriya 0.
Mar 29: Karpaty 2 Sevastopol 0; Metalurh Donetsk 1 Volyn 3; Vorskla 3 Hoverla 1.
Mar 30: Illichivets 3 Chornomorets 1; Metalist 2 Shakhtar 4; Dnipro 2 Dynamo 0.

UKRAINE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shakhtar	20	14	2	4	45	18	44
Dnipro	19	12	5	2	37	18	41
Dynamo	20	12	3	5	40	22	39
Metalist	18	9	7	2	33	19	34
Chornomorets	19	9	6	4	19	14	33
Vorskla	20	7	9	4	29	28	30
Metalurh D	20	7	6	7	32	34	27
Volyn	20	7	6	7	21	27	27
Zorya	19	6	7	6	21	21	25
Karpaty	19	5	7	7	20	24	22
Illichivets	19	6	3	10	18	22	21
Sevastopol	19	5	4	10	19	35	19
Hoverla	20	5	3	12	17	30	18
Metalurh Z	20	2	5	13	17	36	11
Tavriya	20	2	3	15	13	33	9
Arsenal[1] (R)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

28-round season (14x2); bottom 2 will be relegated
[1]Arsenal expelled from league after going bankrupt; results annulled

SOUTH AMERICA

LIBERTADORES CUP

Group 1

Mar 11
The Strongest (Bol) 2 (Escobar pen 56, 77)
Velez Sarsfield (Arg) 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Bascunan (Chl)

Mar 13
Universitario (Per) 0
Atletico Paranaense (Bra) 1 (Duarte og 67)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Machado (Col)

Mar 18
Velez Sarsfield 2 (Pratto 79, Correa 81)
The Strongest 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Soto (Ven)

Mar 20
Atletico Paranaense 3 (Dalton og 10, Felipe 62, Ederson 85)
Universitario 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Polic (Chl)

Mar 26
Atletico Paranaense 1 (Drausio 54)
Velez Sarsfield 3 (Allione 7, Pratto 60, Canteros 90+3)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Roldan (Col)
Sent off: Fran Merida (Paranaense) 51min; Papa (Velez) 90min

Mar 27
Universitario 3 (Ruidiaz 29, C Gonzales 38, Gomez pen 57)
The Strongest 3 (Chavez og 32, Cristaldo 66, Reinoso 90)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Buitrago (Col)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 1

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Velez (Q)	5	4	0	1	8	3	12
At Paranaense	5	3	0	2	6	5	9
The Strongest	5	2	1	2	6	6	7
Universitario	5	0	1	4	3	9	1

Group 2

Mar 12
Independiente (Ecu) 2 (Nunez 26, Sornoza 90+1)
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Bolivar 59)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Garay (Per)
Sent off: Bolivar 74min, Edilson 74min (both Botafogo)

Mar 12
San Lorenzo (Arg) 1 (Matos 21)
Union Espanola (Chl) 1 (Canales 83)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ubriaco (Uru)

Mar 18
Botafogo 1 (Ferreyra 3)
Independiente 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ubriaco (Uru)

Mar 20
Union Espanola 1 (Canales 67)
San Lorenzo 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Buitrago (Col)
Sent off: Cetto (San Lorenzo) 53min

Mar 27
Independiente 1 (Sornoza pen 90+5)
San Lorenzo 1 (Blandi 58)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Amarilla (Par)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 2

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Botafogo	4	2	1	1	5	3	7
Espanola	4	1	3	0	5	4	6
Independiente	5	1	2	2	5	6	5
San Lorenzo	5	1	2	2	3	5	5

Group 3

Mar 13
Deportivo Cali (Col) 2 (Viafara 63, Lizarazo pen 74)
Lanus (Arg) 1 (Acosta 20)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Vuaden (Bra)
Sent off: Marchesin (Lanus) 90+5min

Mar 13
O'Higgins (Chl) 2 (Lopez 36, Figueroa 46)
Cerro Porteno (Par) 2 (Gamarra 55, Dos Santos 78)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Vazquez (Uru)
Sent off: Leal (O'Higgins) 62min

Mar 20
Cerro Porteno 2 (Guiza 2, Dos Santos pen 8)
O'Higgins 1 (Calandria pen 10)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Carrillo (Per)

Mar 20
Lanus 2 (Pereyra Diaz 2, Velazquez 5)
Deportivo Cali 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Fedorczuk (Uru)

Mar 26
Deportivo Cali 1 (Camacho 90+3)
O'Higgins 1 (Opazo 57)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Garcia Orozco (Mex)

Mar 27
Lanus 2 (Araujo 72, Benitez 90)
Cerro Porteno 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Silvera (Uru)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 3

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lanus	5	2	1	2	6	5	7
Cerro Porteno	5	2	1	2	7	7	7
Dep Cali	5	2	1	2	4	5	7
O'Higgins	5	1	3	1	5	5	6

Group 4

Mar 12
Nacional (Par) 2 (Melgarejo 9, Torales pen 87)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2 (Josue 22, Jo 27)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Loustau (Arg)

Mar 12
Zamora (Ven) 2 (Ramirez pen 59, Falcon 84)
Independiente Santa Fe (Col) 1 (Copete 72)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Zambrano (Ecu)

Mar 18
Independiente Santa Fe 2 (Perez 26, 88)
Zamora 2 (Falcon 45+3, 73)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Maldonado (Bol)

Mar 19
Atletico Mineiro 1 (Ronaldinho pen 20)
Nacional 1 (Riveros 37)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Ponce (Ecu)

Mar 25
Zamora 2 (Falcon 58, Murillo 65)
Nacional 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Abal (Arg)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 4

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
At Mineiro	4	2	2	0	6	4	8
Zamora	5	2	1	2	6	5	7
Nacional (Par)	5	1	2	2	5	8	5
Ind Santa Fe	4	1	1	2	7	7	4

Group 5

Mar 11
Defensor Sporting (Uru) 2 (Gedoz 64, 78)
Cruzeiro (Bra) 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Abal (Arg)
Sent off: Arias (Defensor) 68min

Mar 11
Real Garcilaso (Per) 1 (Ferreira 36)
Universidad de Chile (Chl) 2 (Fernandez 40, Gutierrez 76)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Roldan (Col)
Sent off: Ferreira (Garcilaso) 90+2min; Lichnovsky (Universidad) 90+2min

Mar 18
Universidad de Chile 1 (Herrera pen 63)
Real Garcilaso 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Arias (Par)

Mar 20
Cruzeiro 2 (Everton Ribeiro 45+5, Julio Baptista 62)
Defensor Sporting 2 (Gedoz 66, Zeballos 90+3)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Vigliano (Arg)
Sent off: Nilton (Cruzeiro) 45+2min; Malvino (Defensor) 45+2min

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 5

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Univ de Chile	4	3	0	1	5	6	9
Defensor	4	2	1	1	8	4	7
Cruzeiro	4	1	1	2	8	7	4
Real Garcilaso	4	1	0	3	4	8	3

Group 6

Mar 11
Atletico Nacional (Col) 2 (Bocanegra 71, 90+2)
Nacional (Uru) 2 (De Pena 4, S Garcia 19)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Rodriguez (Mex)
Sent off: Bernal (Atletico Nacional) 1min

Mar 13
Gremio (Bra) 0
Newell's Old Boys (Arg) 0
Ref: Amarilla (Par)

Mar 18
Nacional 0
Atletico Nacional 1 (Cardona 64)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Orosco (Bol)

Mar 19
Newell's Old Boys 1 (Rodriguez 79)
Gremio 1 (Rhodolfo 90+1)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Vera (Ecu)

Mar 26
Nacional 2 (Mascia 11, Scotti pen 61)
Newell's Old Boys 4 (Castro 22, Caceres 54, Trezeguet 75, 90+1)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Polic (Chl)
Sent off: R Garcia 72min, Bava 81min (both Nacional)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 6

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Newell's	5	2	2	1	9	4	8
Gremio	4	2	2	0	5	1	8
At Nacional	4	2	1	1	4	5	7
Nacional (Uru)	5	0	1	4	4	12	1

Group 7

Mar 11
Emelec (Ecu) 2 (Escalada 16, 61)
Leon (Mex) 1 (Pena 22)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Argote (Ven)

Mar 12
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (Everton 55, 66)
Bolivar (Bol) 2 (Capdevila 52, Pedriel 73)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Osses (Chl)

MOROCCO

Continental defeat

Runners-up in December's Club World Cup, Raja Casablanca were knocked out of this year's CAF Champions League qualifiers by Horoya.

The three-times African champions lost the first leg 1-0 in Guinea but levelled the tie on aggregate with an 87th-minute goal from Mouhssine Iajour in the return, before losing 5-4 on penalties.

Plate winner...Brattan (right)

AUSTRALIA

Roar claim Plate

Brisbane Roar clinched the A-League regular-season Premiers Plate with a 1-0 win over Melbourne Victory thanks to a goal from Luke Brattan two minutes into stoppage time.

Cup victors...Qatar SC

QATAR

Three out of four

Lekhwiya made it three league titles in the last four seasons when they beat Um Salal 2-1.

Qatar Sports Club beat Al Sadd 3-2 in the Final of the Stars Cup with goals from South Korean midfielder Shin Jin-ho and Brazilian striker Adrinao (two).

Mar 19
Bolivar 1 (Arce pen 5)
Flamengo 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Diaz de Vivar (Par)

Mar 19
Leon 3 (Britos 20, Vazquez pen 82, Pena 86)
Emelec 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ceballos (Arg)
Sent off: Lastra (Emelec) 45+3min

Mar 26
Leon 0
Bolivar 1 (Ferreira 70)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Escalante (Ven)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 7

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar	5	2	2	1	6	5	8
Leon	5	2	1	2	7	5	7
Emelec	4	2	0	2	5	8	6
Flamengo	4	1	1	2	6	6	4

Group 8

Mar 11
Anzoategui (Ven) 1 (Arteaga 72)
Santos Laguna (Mex) 1 (Peralta 63)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Orosco (Bol)

Mar 13
Arsenal (Arg) 1 (Furch 4)
Penarol (Uru) 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ricci (Bra)
Sent off: D Rodriguez (Penarol) 90+2min

Mar 18
Santos Laguna 3 (Renteria 13, Orozco 56, Peralta 66)
Anzoategui 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Lamouroux (Col)

Mar 19
Penarol 2 (Aguiar 70, Jonathan Rodriguez 81)
Arsenal 1 (Marcone 54)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sampaio (Bra)

Mar 25
Santos Laguna 4 (Quintero 9, 78, Orozco 59, Renteria 79)
Penarol 1 (Toledo 1)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Vuaden (Bra)

Mar 26
Anzoategui 1 (Escobar 56)
Arsenal 3 (Sanchez 35, Rolle 65, Zaldivia 90+3)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Marques Ribeiro (Bra)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 8

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Santos (Q)	5	4	1	0	11	2	13
Arsenal (Q)	5	3	0	2	8	4	9
Penarol	5	1	1	3	4	9	4
Anzoategui	5	0	2	3	3	11	2

Top 2 in each group qualify for 1st knockout round

ARGENTINA

2nd tournament

Mar 4: Colon 1 Godoy Cruz 1; Gimnasia 1 Rafaela 1; All Boys 0 Argentinos 0.
Mar 5: Lanus 1 Racing 0; Belgrano 1 Estudiantes 1; Boca 2 Olimpo 0; Newell's 4 Velez 1.
Mar 6: Arsenal 0 Quilmes 2; San Lorenzo 2 Rosario 1; Tigre 0 River Plate 0.
Mar 8: Argentinos 0 Lanus 2; Colon 0 Gimnasia 0; Estudiantes 0 Rafaela 0; Velez 3 Belgrano 1.
Mar 9: Godoy Cruz 1 San Lorenzo 1; Racing 1 Boca 2; Olimpo 1 Newell's 0; River Plate 1 Arsenal 0.
Mar 10: Quilmes 1 All Boys 2; Rosario 1 Tigre 1.
Mar 14: Rafaela 3 Velez 1.
Mar 15: Tigre 0 Godoy Cruz 0; Belgrano 1 Olimpo 1; San Lorenzo 0 Colon 0.
Mar 16: Gimnasia 0 Estudiantes 1; Arsenal 1 Rosario 1; Newell's 2 Racing 0; Boca 1 Argentinos 1; All Boys 3 River Plate 2.
Mar 17: Lanus 1 Quilmes 0.
Mar 21: Olimpo 2 Rafaela 1; Colon 1 Tigre 0.
Mar 22: Argentinos 0 Newell's 0; Velez 1 Estudiantes 1; Rosario 2 All Boys 0; Racing 2 Belgrano 0.
Mar 23: Gimnasia 2 San Lorenzo 1; Godoy Cruz 2 Arsenal 1; River Plate 2 Lanus 0; Quilmes 0 Boca 0.
Mar 28: All Boys 0 Godoy Cruz 0; Estudiantes 0 Olimpo 0; Belgrano 0 Argentinos 0.
Mar 29: Velez 5 Gimnasia 1; Rafaela 2 Racing 2; Newell's 1 Quilmes 1.
Mar 30: Boca 1 River Plate 2; Tigre 2 San Lorenzo 2; Lanus 2 Rosario 1; Arsenal 1 Colon 0.

ARGENTINA – 2ND TOURNAMENT

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Colon	10	5	3	2	9	6	18
Velez	10	5	2	3	20	14	17
Estudiantes	10	4	5	1	7	4	17
River Plate	10	5	2	3	12	10	17
Godoy Cruz	10	4	4	2	12	8	16
Lanus	10	5	1	4	12	14	16
San Lorenzo	10	4	3	3	10	9	15
Olimpo	10	4	3	3	8	7	15
Newell's	10	3	5	2	12	8	14
Rafaela	10	3	4	3	14	13	13
All Boys	10	3	4	3	8	11	13
Boca	10	3	3	4	9	9	12
Rosario	10	3	3	4	11	12	12
Belgrano	10	2	6	2	13	15	12
Gimnasia	10	3	3	4	12	14	12
Argentinos	10	2	5	3	5	7	11
Tigre	10	1	7	2	4	5	10
Arsenal	10	3	1	6	9	13	10
Racing	10	2	2	6	10	13	8
Quilmes	10	2	2	6	5	10	8

19-round tournament (19x1); the 3 teams with the worst points-per-game average over the 3 most recent seasons will be relegated

Leading goalscorer
7 Mauro Zarate (Velez Sarsfield)

CONCACAF

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-finals

1st legs - Mar 10-12; 2nd legs - Mar 18-20
Alajuelense (CR) v Arabe Unido (Pan)
0-0, 2-0 (agg 2-0)
Kansas City (USA) v Cruz Azul (Mex)
1-0, 1-5 (agg 2-5)
Los Angeles Galaxy (USA) v Tijuana (Mex)
1-0, 2-4 (agg 3-4)
San Jose Earthquakes (USA) v Toluca (Mex)
1-1, 1-1 (agg 2-2, Toluca 5-4 on pens)

ANTIGUA & BARBUDA

Willikies relegated after finishing bottom of the rel/prom play-offs table

MEXICO

Clausura

Regular season

Mar 7: Morelia 3 Pumas 1; Leon 0 Veracruz 1; Toluca 3 Puebla 0; Tijuana 2 Guadalajara 0.
Mar 8: America 2 Santos 4; Pachuca 2 Monterrey 0; Tigres 3 Cruz Azul 0; Atlas 2 Chiapas 2.
Mar 9: Atlante 4 Queretaro 2.
Mar 14: Queretaro 0 Toluca 2.
Mar 15: Veracruz 0 Atlas 1; Cruz Azul 2 Tijuana 1; Santos 3 Pachuca 1; Monterrey 0 Morelia 1; Chiapas 2 America 2.
Mar 16: Puebla 0 Tigres 1; Pumas 5 Atlante 0; Guadalajara 1 Leon 0.
Mar 21: Morelia 2 Santos 2; Tijuana 3 Puebla 1.
Mar 22: America 0 Veracruz 0; Tigres 0 Queretaro 2; Pachuca 2 Chiapas 0; Leon 0 Cruz Azul 0; Atlas 1 Guadalajara 1.
Mar 23: Pumas 1 Monterrey 2; Atlante 2 Toluca 1.
Mar 28: Queretaro 2 Tijuana 1; Santos 2 Pumas 1.
Mar 29: Veracruz 3 Pachuca 1; Toluca 2 Tigres 1; Cruz Azul 1 Atlas 3; Monterrey 3 Atlante 2; Chiapas 1 Morelia 0.
Mar 30: Puebla 1 Leon 1; Guadalajara 0 America 4.

MEXICO – CLAUSURA: REGULAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cruz Azul	13	9	2	2	21	10	29
Toluca	13	9	1	3	21	8	28
Santos	13	5	5	3	23	19	20
America	13	6	2	5	18	14	20
Pachuca	13	6	2	5	15	11	20
Pumas	13	5	3	5	21	16	18
Atlante	13	5	3	5	16	21	18
Atlas	13	4	5	4	15	15	17
Tijuana	13	5	2	6	15	18	17
Guadalajara	13	4	5	4	9	14	17
Leon	13	4	4	5	16	13	16
Morelia	13	4	4	5	13	14	16
Chiapas	13	4	4	5	13	16	16
Queretaro	13	5	1	7	13	17	16
Monterrey	13	4	3	6	12	16	15
Tigres	13	3	5	5	8	12	14
Veracruz	13	3	4	6	9	17	13
Puebla	13	2	5	6	9	16	11

17-round regular season (17x1); top 8 will enter championship play-offs, the team with the worst points-per-game average over the 3 most recent seasons will be relegated

UNITED STATES

Regular season

Mar 8: Seattle 1 Kansas City 0; DC United 0 Columbus 3; Vancouver 4 New York Red Bulls 1; Dallas 3 Montreal 2; Houston 4 New England 0; Los Angeles 0 Salt Lake 1; Portland 1 Philadelphia 1.
Mar 9: Chivas 3 Chicago 2.
Mar 15: Philadelphia 1 New England 0; New York Red Bulls 1 Colorado 1; Seattle 1 Toronto 2; Kansas City 1 Dallas 1; Houston 1 Montreal 0; San Jose 3 Salt Lake 3.
Mar 16: Portland 1 Chicago 1; Chivas 1 Vancouver 1.
Mar 22: New England 0 Vancouver 0; Salt Lake 1 Los Angeles 1; Toronto 1 DC United 0; Colorado 2 Portland 0; Columbus 2 Philadelphia 1; Kansas City 1 San Jose 0; Dallas 3 Chivas 1.
Mar 23: Chicago 1 New York Red Bulls 1; Montreal 0 Seattle 2.
Mar 29: Philadelphia 1 Montreal 1; DC United 2 Chicago 2; Colorado 2 Kansas City 3; Vancouver 2 Houston 1; Dallas 2 Portland 1; Salt Lake 3 Toronto 0; Seattle 1 Columbus 2; San Jose 1 New England 2.
Mar 30: New York Red Bulls 1 Chivas 1.

USA – REGULAR: EASTERN CONFERENCE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Columbus	3	3	0	0	7	2	9
Kansas City	4	2	1	1	5	4	7
Houston	3	2	0	1	6	2	6
Toronto	3	2	0	1	3	4	6
Philadelphia	4	1	2	1	4	4	5
New England	4	1	1	2	2	6	4
Chicago	4	0	3	1	6	7	3
New York RB	4	0	3	1	4	7	3
Montreal	4	0	1	3	3	7	1
DC United	3	0	1	2	2	6	1

34-round regular season (7x3 & 2x2 in own conference, 9x1 in western conference)

USA – REGULAR: WESTERN CONFERENCE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dallas	4	3	1	0	9	5	10
Salt Lake	4	2	2	0	8	4	8
Vancouver	4	2	2	0	7	3	8
Seattle	4	2	0	2	5	4	6
Chivas	4	1	2	1	6	7	5
Colorado	3	1	1	1	5	4	4
Portland	4	0	2	2	3	6	2
Los Angeles	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
San Jose	3	0	1	2	4	6	1

34-round regular season (8x3 in own conference, 10x1 in eastern conference)

Top 5 in both conferences will enter championship play-offs; no relegation from this league

AFRICA

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

1st round

1st legs - Mar 1/2; 2nd legs - Mar 7-10
AC Leopards (Con) v Primeiro Agosto (Ang) 4-1, 0-2 (agg 4-3); Barrack Young Controllers (Lbr) v Sewe Sport (IvC) 3-3, 0-1 (agg 3-4); Berekum Chelsea (Gha) v Al Ahly Benghazi (Lby) 1-1, 0-2 (agg 1-3); Dedebit (Eth) v CS Sfaxien (Tun) 1-2, 0-2 (agg 1-4); Dynamos (Zim) v AS Vita (DRC) 0-0, 0-1 (agg 0-1); Enyimba (Nga) v Real Bamako (Mli) 1-2, 1-0 (agg 2-2, Real Bamako on away goals); ES Setif (Alg) v ASFA Yennenga (BuF) 5-0, 0-0 (agg 5-0); Flambeau de l'Est (Bdi) v Coton Sport (Cam) 1-0, 0-5 (agg 1-5); Gor Mahia (Ken) v Esperance (Tun) 2-3, 0-5 (agg 2-8); Horoya (Gui) v Raja Casablanca (Mor) 1-0, 0-1 (agg 1-1, Horoya 5-4 on pens); Kaizer Chiefs (SAf) v Liga Muculmana (Moz) 4-0, 3-0 (agg 7-0); Les Astres (Cam) v TP Mazembe (DRC) 1-1, 0-3 (agg 1-4); Nkana (Zam) v Kampala City Council (Uga) 2-2, 2-1 (agg 4-3); Stade Malien (Mli) v Al Hilal (Sud) 0-0, 0-2 (agg 0-2); Young Africans (Tan) v Al Ahly (Egy) 1-0, 0-1 (agg 1-1, Al Ahly 4-3 on pens); Zamalek (Egy) v Kabuscorp (Ang) 1-0, 0-0 (agg 1-0)

2nd round

1st legs - Mar 21-23; 2nd legs - Mar 29/30
AC Leopards v Al Hilal 1-1, 0-0
(agg 1-1, Al Hilal on away goals)
Al Ahly Benghazi v Al Ahly 1-0, 3-2 (agg 4-2)
AS Vita v Kaizer Chiefs 3-0, 0-2 (agg 3-2)
ES Setif v Coton Sport 1-0, 1-0 (agg 2-0)
Horoya v CS Sfaxien 0-1, 0-2 (agg 0-3)
Nkana v Zamalek 0-0, 0-5 (agg 0-5)
Real Bamako v Esperance 1-1, 0-3 (agg 1-4)
Sewe Sport v TP Mazembe 2-1, 0-1
(agg 2-2, TP Mazembe on away goals)

Winners qualify for group stage; losers enter Confederation Cup

SAUDI ARABIA

Draw seals title

Al Nasr were crowned league champions after a 1-1 draw with Al Shabab.

THAILAND

Unbeaten run ends

Buriram United's 34-match unbeaten run in the Thai Premier League came to an end as they lost 3-2 at BEC Tero Sasana in their third game of the new season. It was the club's first league loss since October 2012.

City goalscorer...Tade

NEW ZEALAND

City wait is over

Auckland City won the Premiership for the first time in five years with a 1-0 victory against Team Wellington in the Grand Final.

A 17th goal of the season for the league's top scorer Emiliano Tade was enough to seal victory and condemn Wellington to defeat at this stage of the competition for the third time in their history.

City, who were unbeaten at home all term, have now equalled Waitakere United's record of five domestic titles.

ASIA

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Mar 11: Al Rayyan (Qat) 1 Esteghlal (Irn) 0; Al Shabab (Sau) 1 Al Jazira (UAE) 3.
Mar 18: Al Shabab 4 Al Rayyan 3; Esteghlal 2 Al Jazira 2.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP A	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Jazira	3	2	1	0	8	5	7
Al Shabab	3	2	0	1	6	6	6
Al Rayyan	3	1	0	2	6	7	3
Esteghlal	3	0	1	2	2	4	1

Group B

Mar 11: Bunyodkor (Uzb) 1 El Jaish (Qat) 2; Foolad Khouzestan (Irn) 1 Al Fateh (Sau) 0.
Mar 19: Al Fateh 0 El Jaish 0; Bunyodkor 1 Foolad Khouzestan 1.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP B	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
El Jaish	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Foolad	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Bunyodkor	3	0	2	1	2	3	2
Al Fateh	3	0	2	1	0	1	2

Group C

Mar 12: Al Ittihad (Sau) 2 Al Ain (UAE) 1; Lekhwiya (Qat) 0 Tractor Sazi (Irn) 0.
Mar 18: Al Ain 3 Tractor Sazi 1; Lekhwiya 2 Al Ittihad 0.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP C	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ain	3	2	0	1	6	4	6
Lekhwiya	3	1	1	1	3	2	4
Tractor Sazi	3	1	1	1	2	3	4
Al Ittihad	3	1	0	2	2	4	3

Group D

Mar 12: Al Ahli (UAE) 1 Al Sadd (Qat) 1; Sepahan (Irn) 3 Al Hilal (Sau) 2.
Mar 19: Al Sadd 2 Al Hilal 2; Sepahan 1 Al Ahli 2.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP D	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Sadd	3	1	2	0	6	4	5
Al Ahli	3	1	2	0	5	4	5
Sepahan	3	1	0	2	5	7	3
Al Hilal	3	0	2	1	6	7	2

Group E

Mar 11: Buriram United (Tha) 1 Pohang Steelers (SKo) 2; Cerezo Osaka (Jap) 1 Shandong Luneng (Chn) 3.
Mar 18: Cerezo Osaka 4 Buriram United 0; Pohang Steelers 2 Shandong Luneng 2.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP E	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shandong	3	1	2	0	6	4	5
Pohang	3	1	2	0	5	4	5
Cerezo Osaka	3	1	1	1	6	4	4
Buriram Utd	3	0	1	2	2	7	1

Group F

Mar 11: Beijing Guoan (Chn) 1 Seoul (SKo) 1; Central Coast Mariners (Aus) 2 Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jap) 1.
Mar 19: Beijing Guoan 2 Central Coast Mariners 1; Sanfrecce Hiroshima 2 Seoul 1.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP F	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Beijing Guoan	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Sanfrecce	3	1	1	1	4	4	4
Seoul	3	1	1	1	4	3	4
Central Coast	3	1	0	2	3	5	3

Group G

Mar 12: Melbourne Victory (Aus) 2 Jeonbuk Motors (SKo) 2; Yokohama F Marinos (Jap) 1 Guangzhou Evergrande (Chn) 1.
Mar 18: Guangzhou Evergrande 3 Jeonbuk Motors 1; Melbourne Victory 1 Yokohama F Marinos 0.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP G	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guangzhou	3	2	1	0	8	4	7
Jeonbuk	3	1	1	1	6	5	4
Melbourne V	3	1	1	1	5	6	4
Yokohama	3	0	1	2	1	5	1

Group H

Mar 12: Guizhou Renhe (Chn) 0 Western Sydney Wanderers (Aus) 1; Ulsan Hyundai (SKo) 2 Kawasaki Frontale (Jap) 0.
Mar 19: Ulsan Hyundai 1 Guizhou Renhe 1; Western Sydney Wanderers 1 Kawasaki Frontale 0.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP H	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ulsan Hyundai	3	2	1	0	6	2	7
West Sydney	3	2	0	1	3	3	6
Kawasaki	3	1	0	2	1	3	3
Guizhou Renhe	3	0	1	2	1	3	1

Top 2 in each group qualify for 1st knockout round

AUSTRALIA

Regular season

Mar 7: Melbourne Victory 3 Central Coast 1.
Mar 8: Newcastle 1 Melbourne Heart 0; Sydney 3 Western Sydney 1.
Mar 9: Wellington Phoenix 1 Perth 1; Brisbane 2 Adelaide 1.
Mar 14: Sydney 1 Brisbane 1.
Mar 15: Western Sydney 0 Adelaide 0; Central Coast 3 Newcastle 1; Perth 1 Melbourne Victory 2.
Mar 16: Melbourne Heart 2 Wellington Phoenix 2.
Mar 21: Adelaide 3 Sydney 1.
Mar 22: Newcastle 5 Wellington Phoenix 0; Brisbane 1 Melbourne Victory 0.
Mar 23: Melbourne Heart 1 Central Coast 2; Western Sydney 3 Perth 0.
Mar 28: Brisbane 2 Melbourne Heart 1.
Mar 29: Central Coast 2 Western Sydney 1; Melbourne Victory 1 Sydney 1.
Mar 30: Wellington Phoenix 0 Adelaide 1; Perth 2 Newcastle 1.

AUSTRALIA – REGULAR	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Brisbane (Q)	25	16	3	6	42	22	51
Central C't (Q)	25	11	6	8	30	33	39
West Sydney	25	10	8	7	30	26	38
Adelaide	25	10	7	8	43	32	37
Melbourne V	25	10	7	8	36	40	37
Sydney	25	10	3	12	34	36	33
Newcastle	25	9	5	11	30	32	32
Wellington P	25	7	7	11	34	43	28
Melbourne H	25	6	7	12	32	37	25
Perth	25	6	7	12	24	34	25

27-round regular season (9x3); top 6 will enter championship play-offs; no relegation from this league

JAPAN

Mar 8: Sanfrecce 2 Kawasaki 1; Albirex 0 Gamba 2; Tokushima 0 Cerezo 2; Vissel 1 Kashiwa 1; Shimizu 0 Yokohama 1; Tokyo 1 Ventforet 1; Omiya 1 Nagoya 2; Urawa 0 Sagan 1; Kashima 2 Vegalta 0.
Mar 15: Yokohama 3 Tokushima 0; Ventforet 1 Albirex 1; Sanfrecce 0 Urawa 2; Kashiwa 0 Nagoya 1; Kawasaki 3 Omiya 4; Cerezo 4 Shimizu 1; Sagan 0 Kashima 3; Vegalta 0 Gamba 0; Vissel 2 Tokyo 1.
Mar 23: Albirex 1 Sagan 0; Ventforet 1 Yokohama 0; Tokushima 0 Kashiwa 2; Kashima 0 Cerezo 2; Urawa 1 Shimizu 1; Omiya 4 Vegalta 0; Nagoya 2 Vissel 1; Gamba 1 Sanfrecce 1; Tokyo 0 Kawasaki 4.
Mar 28: Kawasaki 1 Nagoya 0.
Mar 29: Vegalta 1 Ventforet 1; Yokohama 1 Kashima 3; Cerezo 0 Albirex 0; Sanfrecce 3 Tokushima 1; Kashiwa 2 Omiya 2; Shimizu 1 Tokyo 3; Vissel 3 Urawa 1; Sagan 2 Gamba 0.

JAPAN	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kashima	5	4	0	1	12	3	12
Cerezo	5	3	1	1	8	2	10
Sanfrecce	5	3	1	1	7	5	10
Sagan	5	3	0	2	8	4	9
Yokohama	5	3	0	2	7	4	9
Nagoya	5	3	0	2	7	6	9
Vissel	5	2	2	1	9	7	8
Albirex	5	2	2	1	4	4	8
Kawasaki	5	2	1	2	11	8	7
Omiya	5	2	1	2	11	9	7
Urawa	5	2	1	2	5	5	7
Kashiwa	5	1	3	1	6	5	6
Ventforet	5	1	3	1	4	7	6
Gamba	5	1	2	2	3	4	5
Tokyo	5	1	2	2	6	9	5
Shimizu	5	1	1	3	6	11	4
Vegalta	5	0	2	3	2	9	2
Tokushima	5	0	0	5	1	15	0

34-round season (17x2); bottom 3 will be relegated

OCEANIA

NEW ZEALAND

Championship Final

Mar 16 - Auckland (Kiwitea Street)
Auckland City 1 (Tade 31)
Team Wellington 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 2,232. **Ref:** Conger

KEY TO TABLES

(C) = champions
(Q) = qualified for next stage
(R) = relegated

FORTHCOMING FIXTURES

May 7 to 21
European Under-17 Championship
May 14
Europa League Final
May 21 to June 1
Toulon Tournament
May 24
UEFA Champions League Final

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THE HOSTS BRAZIL

Solid...as he demonstrated against Japan at last summer's Confederations Cup, Luiz Gustavo (left) has the awareness to anchor Brazil's midfield and protect the central defenders

Cautious hosts find their shape with the return of Big Phil

Scolari has restored confidence and attacking intent. By Tim Vickery

"The hard part was getting to where we are now," said Brazil's co-ordinator Carlos Alberto Parreira to an audience of Brazilian coaches in December. Beside him sat national boss Luiz Felipe Scolari, radiating confidence. "Our big problem was the system," added Parreira. "How are we going to play?"

It was an inevitable doubt. Brazil crawled away from the last World Cup needing two major changes. One was in terms of personnel, as Dunga had taken an ageing side to South Africa, the other was the necessity to wean the team off an excessive dependence on counter-attacking. On home ground in 2014, Brazil will clearly have to face cautious opponents who will be reluctant to be drawn forward.

The thankless task of initiating the changes fell to Mano Menezes. He blooded a new generation and instigated the tactic of pressing high in the opposing half. The innovation proved useful but the results were not great and Brazil did not beat a heavyweight opponent during Menezes' three-years in charge. He also had a credibility problem, lacking the experience, father-figure charisma and steely man-of-destiny glare of Brazil's 2002 World Cup-winning coach Scolari. However, many were still sceptical when he was replaced by Scolari towards the end of 2012.

Had "Big Phil" been knocked down to size by disappointing spells in charge of Chelsea and Palmeiras? And could he work with the veteran Parreira, who was brought back as his co-ordinator? Parreira, for example, was known to despise the back-three formation that Scolari used in 2002 and was considering employing once again.

Despite the concerns, the jigsaw started to fit together at the start of June last year when, warming up for the Confederations Cup, Brazil played England and France. It was always going to be a vital month. With no qualifiers to whip the team into shape, this was the first big chance Scolari had to work with his players.

The key development was the consolidation of Luiz Gustavo in the holding role. With the space in front of the centre-backs protected, the team stopped giving away cheap goals. Scolari also recalled Julio Cesar in goal and Fred at centre-forward. These two, along with Gustavo, gave the side a solid spine and brought the best out of Neymar. Brazil won the Confederations Cup and in the process forged a bond with their fans and found their best XI.

With his starting line-up established, Scolari has used recent friendlies to have a look at options, both in personnel and in terms of tactical tweaks – such as the recall of Ramires and a switch from 4-2-3-1 to 4-3-3, or the use of Robinho as a "false nine" in November.

Almost everything so far has worked and Scolari is now full of options – which he will have to whittle down to a squad of 23. WS

The coach

Luiz Felipe Scolari

Led Brazil to triumph in the 2002 World Cup and is adamant they will win again this year. The haste of his appointment in late 2012 was to cut off the momentum of a media campaign in favour of Pep Guardiola – which has since been forgotten as Scolari's work has restored Brazil's self-confidence.

Former world champion...Scolari

The key players

Disciplined...skipper Silva

Thiago Silva

Immaculate centre-back and team captain who, alongside David Luiz and two attacking full-backs, will need to impose calm discipline on the defensive line.

Luiz Gustavo

Tall holding midfielder whose inclusion has done much to tighten up the team. The fact that he is left-footed makes it easier for him to protect the weaker side of the defence.

Oscar

Midfielder who belies a frail appearance with a versatility that is of great use to the team. He can work back and mark, organise from deep, create higher up the field and get beyond the attacking line to score.

Versatile...Oscar

Neymar

The poster boy of the tournament and his team's great attacking hope. Has pace, unpredictability, dazzling skill and already 30 international goals to his name. The World Cup, though, will be his big test.

Pressure...all of Brazil will be looking to Neymar to deliver the World Cup

The unanswered questions

Is there a lack of experience in the team?

Only two of the likely starting line-up got on the pitch at the last World Cup and Scolari has mused on this as a possible problem. The World Cup will be on a totally different scale from the Confederations Cup, so how will the team react under pressure?

Might Julio Cesar have lost his edge?

The last time Brazil played a competitive match with a different goalkeeper was the 2007 Copa America. Cesar is a vital part of the team, but will he pay the price for a long period of inactivity at QPR, followed by an MLS season with Toronto that only started in mid-March?

Important...Fred is back from injury

Can Fred recapture his form?

Shortly after his heroics in the Confederations Cup, Brazil's number nine picked up a long-term injury and made a timid return in the early months of 2014. Brazil lack strength in depth at centre-forward, so a fully-fit Fred is important.

Reasons to be cheerful

A bond with the fans

In the highly politicised climate of the Confederations Cup, an inspirational moment took place before games when the national anthem stopped but fans and players kept singing.

Physical preparation

Paulo Paixao, who was so important when Brazil won the 2002 World Cup, is in charge of physical preparation again.

Absence of controversy

There are no high-profile absentees from the squad that the press can use to cause problems or whose name the crowd can chant in protest.

United...the national team joined the crowd in singing the national anthem

Reasons to be fearful

The ghost of 1950

Almost all the other powers of the game have won their home World Cup, but Brazil came up short in 1950.

Red cards

The last World Cup campaign went awry with a red card for explosive midfielder Felipe Melo, who was sent off during the quarter-final defeat to Holland. This year, left-back Marcelo is the most likely candidate to suffer a potentially fatal loss of composure.

The tournament gets serious early

After the group stage comes a tricky second-round tie against either Spain, Holland or Chile.

World Soccer's GREAT TEAMS

Milan 1994

Beaten finalists the year before, Fabio Capello's side eventually proved themselves to be the best in Europe

Although they had already wrapped up the Serie A title by the time they arrived at the Olympic Stadium in Athens, Fabio Capello's Milan were very much the underdogs against Barcelona in the Champions League Final.

Missing the experienced pairing of Franco Baresi and Alessandro Costacurta through suspension, Capello was forced to employ a makeshift central defensive partnership against Johan Cruyff's fearsome front line of Romario and Hristo Stoichkov. Yet as *World Soccer*'s Keir Radnedge said of the Spanish side at the time: "It wasn't that they played badly. Quite simply, Milan were on a different planet."

Yugoslavia forward Dejan Savicevic had had his problems with Capello during the season but he was unstoppable on a balmy night in Athens, setting up three goals and scoring the other in a 4-0 thrashing.

Marcel Desailly, who had been in the Marseille side that beat Milan in the Final a year earlier, was immense in midfield and he capped a superb performance with the fourth goal. Daniele Massaro, who had missed a hatful of chances 12 months previously, made amends by scoring the first two.

Throughout all of this Capello, in Radnedge's words, "like some flamboyant maestro of the baton, conducted his orchestra from a yard or two behind the touchline – arms gesturing wildly to maintain the momentum of his first violins in attack while simultaneously drawing out his virtuoso solo trumpets in midfield and defence".

Cruyff, he noted, "by contrast, sat back on the Barcelona bench, impassive, resigned". Radnedge added: "It was almost as if he had recognised, from the first exchanges of the evening, that Milan were in an unstoppable mood and there was nothing he could do about it.

"It was not that Barcelona were bad, rather that Milan were magnificent.

"Such quality, produced so consistently throughout every minute of a match on such an occasion. Barcelona are good, very good; second best in Europe. But Milan were simply far, far better." WS

Joy...Milan's two-goal hero Massaro (in Barcelona shirt) with his Milan team-mates

THE STARTING XI

Sebastiano Rossi
Goalkeeper
Spent 12 years at the club, from 1990 until 2002, during which time he won 12 major titles.

Mauro Tassotti
Right-back
Captain in Athens and played for Milan for 17 years. Coach in 2001 and still involved at the club.

Filippo Galli
Defender
Won three European Cup/Champions League Finals with Milan. Now in charge of the club's youth system.

Paolo Maldini
Defender
Played 902 times for Milan including eight European Cup/Champions League Finals, winning five.

Christian Panucci
Left-back
Played for six Italian clubs, including both San Siro teams. Is now Capello's assistant with Russia.

Zvonimir Boban
Midfielder
Croatia international who joined Milan from Dinamo Zagreb in 1991 and stayed for 11 years.

Demetrio Albertini
Midfielder
The engine room of the side, at 22, in a year in which he also played for Italy in the World Cup Final.

Marcel Desailly
Midfielder
Collected back-to-back Champions League titles, having played in Marseille's win, against Milan, in 1993.

Roberto Donadoni
Midfielder
Won six Serie A titles in two spells with Milan and is now in charge of Parma. Was Italy coach at Euro 2008.

Dejan Savicevic
Forward
Yugoslav striker who was a European Cup winner with Red Star Belgrade in 1991 before he joined Milan.

Daniele Massaro
Forward
Played over 200 games for Milan and was part of Italy's World Cup-winning squad in 1982.

THE COACH AND HIS TEAM

Fabio Capello
Succeeded Arrigo Sacchi as Milan coach in June 1991 and led the club to the Serie A title in his first three seasons in charge. He won it again in 1996, before joining Real Madrid and winning La Liga in his first campaign in Spain.

Another title followed with Roma in 2001 and again with Real Madrid in 2007. He managed England to the World Cup finals in 2010 and will be in charge of Russia this summer in Brazil.

Tactics
Without the suspended Baresi and Costacurta, the experienced Galli played alongside Maldini and they sat deep to deny Barcelona strikers Romario and Stoichkov the opportunity to use their pace.

Desailly and Albertini prevented Jose Maria Bakero and Pep Guardiola from getting into the game, while Boban and Donadoni were the supply line down the flanks for the forwards.

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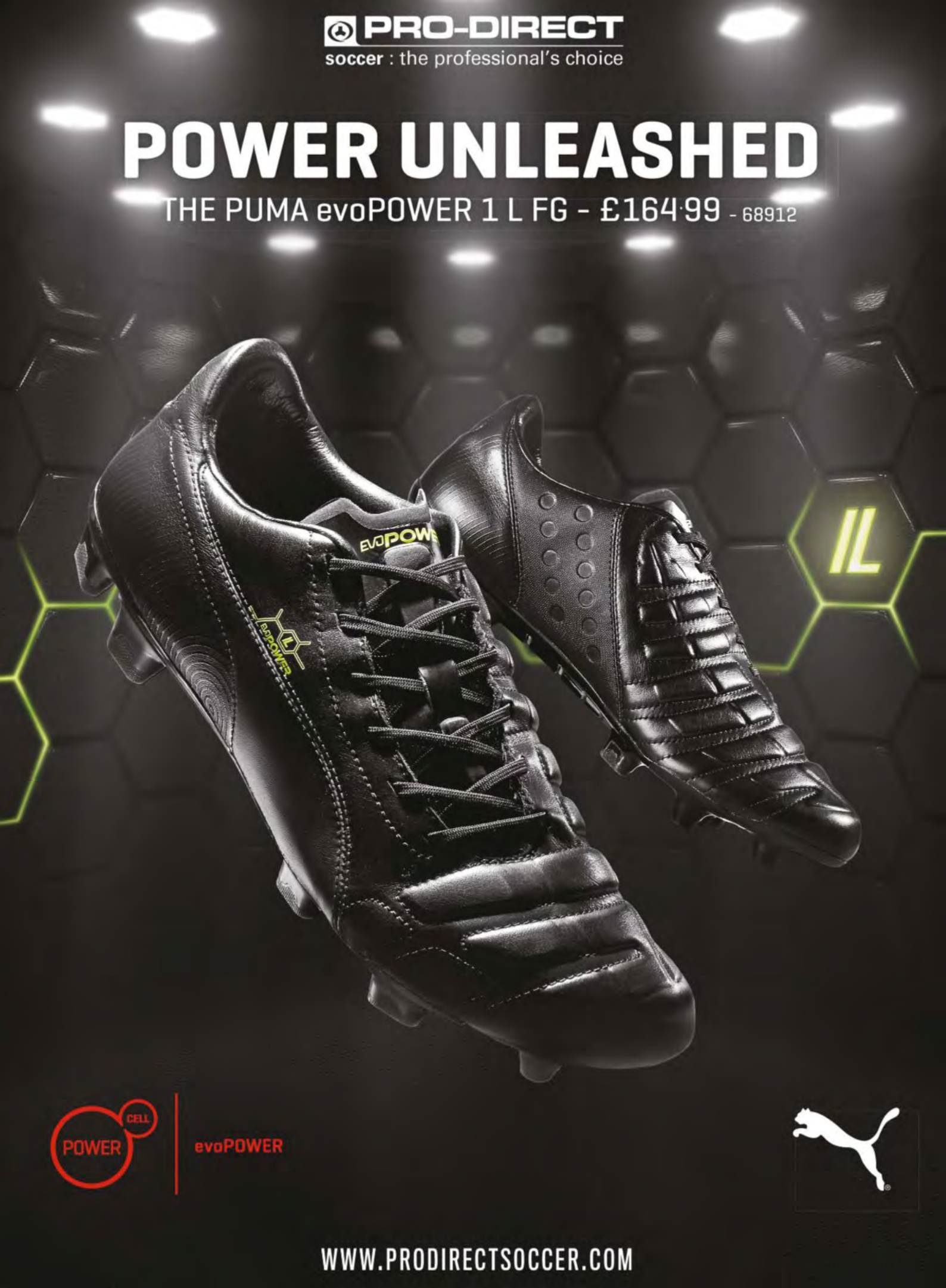

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